



## Intimate partner violence and companion animal welfare

CM Tiplady,<sup>a\*</sup> DB Walsh<sup>b</sup> and CJC Phillips<sup>a</sup>

**Objective** To investigate the effect of intimate partner violence (IPV) on companion animal welfare.

**Design** Self-selected telephone survey of people meeting the criteria.

**Methods** Members of the Australian public with experience of IPV and concurrent companion animal ownership were invited to telephone a researcher for a semi-structured interview.

**Results** In total, 26 Australian women reported one or more companion animals in the household being verbally and/or physically abused by their male partner, usually with prolonged effects on animal behaviour; 92% indicated that they had been unwilling to discuss the animal abuse with a veterinarian. Many were unaware of animal accommodation services for people fleeing violence and those who did know about these were unwilling to use them, citing their bond with the animals as the main reason. Animals targeted for abuse were most likely to be dogs and owned by women rather than men, children or both partners.

**Conclusion** Animals can be severely affected by domestic violence situations and many people experiencing violence are unwilling to confide in veterinarians or seek help from animal shelters.

**Keywords** animal abuse; dogs; domestic violence; interpersonal violence; intimate partner violence

**Abbreviations** HITS, Hitting, Insulting, Threatening, Screaming and Frightening; IPV, intimate partner violence

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Domestic violence is traditionally understood as an abuse of power between intimate partners, although recently it has been expanded to include other family members.<sup>1</sup> This study focused on intimate partner violence (IPV) to investigate the potential involvement of companion animals, with IPV defined as any behaviour that causes damage to another person (physical, sexual, emotional or financial), causes someone to live in fear, damages property or threatens to damage a person, pets or property.<sup>1,2</sup> IPV usually involves men perpetrating violence against women.<sup>3</sup> A survey of more than 6000 Australian women found that one in three women had experienced violence from a male partner,<sup>4</sup> with violence against women considered the most pervasive yet under-recognised human rights violation in the world.<sup>5</sup> IPV and child abuse are known to coexist in some families,<sup>6</sup> and children in violent households may show higher levels of cruelty to animals<sup>7</sup> than those not living with IPV.

\*Corresponding author.

<sup>a</sup>Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics, School of Veterinary Science, University of Queensland, Gatton, Queensland 4343, Australia; [catherine.tiplady@uqconnect.edu.au](mailto:catherine.tiplady@uqconnect.edu.au)

<sup>b</sup>School of Social Work and Human Services, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

A link between abuse of animals and humans has been demonstrated,<sup>8–10</sup> with some studies suggesting a progression from abuse of animals during childhood and/or adolescence to violence toward humans during adulthood.<sup>11–13</sup> However, IPV may also involve threats to harm, or the actual harm, of animals as behaviours to control the partner.<sup>14,15</sup> Controlling behaviour is one of a range of assaultive and non-assaultive tactics used by IPV perpetrators to dominate, control and induce fear and/or subservience in their partner.<sup>16</sup> These behaviours, often referred to collectively as ‘coercive control’ include physical violence, sexual violence, emotional/psychological abuse, stalking, confinement and/or control over activities such as working and social life, property destruction and threats of violence against the woman and children or other loved ones.<sup>16</sup> Companion animals are often regarded as members of the family<sup>17</sup> and threatening to harm them is a method used by some perpetrators of IPV to gain coercive control over their partners.<sup>18</sup> Male partners who abuse their female partners and pets show more controlling behaviours than abusive men who do not harm pets.<sup>15</sup>

This study aimed to survey the effect of IPV on the welfare of companion animals, in particular the types of animals that were affected and the range of reported involvement of animals.

### Materials and methods

Approval for a survey of IPV victims was granted by the University of Queensland Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee (project no: 2009000709). The survey instrument was piloted to three individuals and minor changes were made on the basis of their responses.

Participants were recruited from the Australian public by advertising posters, radio, animal welfare and IPV victim support websites and newspaper articles. The posters, which were distributed to veterinary clinics and conference attendees, public noticeboards and IPV support groups, invited individuals who had experienced IPV, were currently safe, aged 18 or over and had owned a pet at the time of a violent relationship to telephone the primary researcher to provide anonymous information regarding IPV and pets. Respondents self-selected to contact the researcher during nominated hours over a 2-month period.

Caller suitability was further assessed on the telephone using the HITS (Hitting, Insulting, Threatening, Screaming and Frightening) screening tool.<sup>19</sup> The combination of behaviours nominated in the HITS tool is recognised as comprising IPV.<sup>16</sup> Participants were required to respond positively to all behaviours to be included. For example, if a participant responded to ‘insulting’ only, they would not have been considered eligible for inclusion in this study. Each participant was asked at the commencement of the telephone survey if they had been in a relationship in the past in which they had experienced IPV (specifically whether their partner or ex-partner had ever used the

HITS behaviours against them), if they owned at least one pet at the time of the abusive relationship and whether they were currently safe and aged over 18 years. Those not meeting these requirements were excluded from the study ( $n = 6$ ). Both men and women of any sexual orientation were eligible to take part.

The introduction to the survey involved the researcher (C.M.T.) informing callers of the title and aim of the study and that the researcher was a veterinarian undertaking research with The University of Queensland. Expected minimum time for completion of the survey (10–15 min) was indicated to the caller and telephone numbers of one of the supervisors of the study (D.B.W.), The University of Queensland Human Ethics Committee Officer and support telephone numbers for a domestic violence helpline and RSPCA animal cruelty line were offered. Callers were asked where they had heard about the study and were informed that some questions might be distressing and that they were free to decline to answer any with which they were uncomfortable, or to terminate the survey at any time.

The survey followed a series of questions, in response to which callers could describe their experiences of IPV and any effect on companion animals. Questions covered the number, species, breed, age and ownership of all animals living in the household at the time of the IPV relationship; veterinary involvement; treatment for any injuries; who, if anyone, treated the pet; and whether the caller felt they could have discussed the abuse of the pet with a veterinarian. The respondent was asked a closed question regarding whether they had noticed any behavioural changes in any of the animals after witnessing the IPV and if so, they were asked to provide details of that animal's age, species, breed and ownership and to describe the nature of the changes with prompts, if necessary, such as 'Did this animal react differently to people?' Other questions covered details of threats and actual verbal and physical abuse of animals and age, species, breed and ownership of these animals. Physical threats towards animals was defined as a bodily movement intended to simulate or commence an aggressive act, such as a partner moving towards an animal as if to kick or strike it. Verbal threats were defined as a spoken declaration of intent to harm an animal. Physical abuse was defined as direct bodily harm inflicted on the animal (such as kicking, hitting or throwing the animal) or using an object to harm the animal, for example, striking the animal with a whip. Verbal abuse was defined as shouting or screaming at an animal in such a way as to cause it distress. Respondents were asked about the partner's threats and/or failure to care for any pets; whether the partner had ever threatened to harm pets if the woman left; awareness of pet accommodation services for people fleeing IPV; and whether knowledge of this service would have resulted in the caller and pets leaving the violent situation. Finally, demographic questions (current age, level of education achieved, number of children and whether the caller was currently in the paid workforce) were asked. This strategy was designed to move callers from potentially painful recollections of IPV, which can cause them to relive the trauma, to routine demographic questions, in order to minimise post-interview stress.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the caller was asked whether there was anything else that they would like to mention.

All survey responses were initially recorded manually and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Data processing included determination of means, medians and ranges, as well as contingency tables

**Table 1. Animals living with intimate partner violence: number of households with at least one of each type of animal**

Animal	No. of households <sup>a</sup>
Dog breed total	22
Working breed	10
Terrier	4
Utility breed	4
Gundog	3
Non-sporting	2
Pit Bull Terrier	2
Dog's age	
Puppy–3 years	9
4–10 years	9
11+ years	3
Dog's sex	
Male	14
Female	12
Both male and female	6
Unspecified	2
Other animals	
Cat	10
Caged bird	2
Poultry	2
Rabbit	1
Reptile/spider	1
Ruminant livestock	1
Horse	1
Wildlife under care	1

<sup>a</sup>Households with two or more different breeds of dogs are included separately.

with Pearson's correlations between variables and Chi-square values with appropriate probability estimates for contingency tables with at least 80% of cells containing five or more counts.<sup>20</sup> Fisher's exact test was used to test the likelihood of dogs being more likely than other animals to be the target animal.<sup>21</sup> Dog breeds were classified using the guidelines published on the Australian National Kennel Council website.<sup>22</sup> Mixed breed dogs were classified using the first named breed by owners (Table 1). Pit Bull Terriers and their crosses were excluded from the terrier classification because they are not recognised as a purebred dog by the Canine Control Council Queensland (pers. comm. August 09).

## Results

### Respondents

Twenty-six callers (all women) met the criteria for inclusion in the study, and a further six were excluded because they failed to meet the criteria. Excluded callers comprised four people who reported the effect on animals living among friends or family members experiencing IPV, one who reported adopting a dog from a home where there had been

IPV and one caller (the only male participant) who reported being the perpetrator of violence towards his female partner and animals. At the time of the survey, two women were aged 26–30, six were 31–40, eight were 41–50, nine were 51–60 and one was over 61 years. Women were the primary animal carers in 17 households (65%), consistent with data suggesting that women comprise the majority of animal carers in two-thirds of Australian households.<sup>23</sup> Even in households where the animal was owned by both partners, the family, the male partner, the children or a former partner (n = 11; 42%), five women (45% of these households) considered that they were the main carer of the animals.

### Animals

Dogs were the companion animal most often owned by the respondents in this study, with 85% (n = 22) of households having at least one dog (Table 1). Of the callers with dogs at the time of the IPV, most (n = 10; 45%) had working breed dogs, followed by terriers (n = 4; 18%), utility breeds (n = 4; 18%), gundogs (n = 3; 14%), non-sporting (n = 2; 9%) and Pit Bull Terriers (n = 2; 9%) ( $\chi^2 = 10.1$ ,  $P < 0.10$ ). Eighteen callers (69%) provided the dogs' ages at the time of the IPV, with nine households having at least one dog aged up to 3 years, nine having at least one dog aged 4–10 years and three having at least one dog aged 11 years or over. Twenty callers (77%) provided the dog's sex. Of this group, most (n = 14; 70%) women had lived with at least one male dog, 12 (60%) women with at least one female dog and six (30%) women with both male and female dogs. Cats were the second most common animal reported (n = 10; 38% of households). Nineteen (73%) of the households had more than one animal. Details of the animals are provided in Table 1.

### Target animals

In 16 (84%) of the multiple-pet-owning households (n = 19) women reported that there was an individual 'target animal', the one that received the majority of the physical and/or verbal abuse, all of the abuse or the most severe abuse (Table 2). Target animals were as follows: 13 dogs, 2 cats and 1 rabbit. Dogs were more likely to be the target of abuse than other animals in these households (Table 2,  $P = 0.02$ ).

There was no evident effect of the dog's sex on the likelihood of being a target animal (8 males, 6 females, 2 unstated). Of the 16 target animals identified, women in the household were most likely to be the owner (n = 9), compared with men (n = 2), children (n = 2) or both partners (n = 3).

There was no difference in the proportion of animals that were reported to be physically or verbally threatened or abused (mean, 18.5; Table 3). Most callers indicated that one or more animals had been verbally threatened with harm (n = 15) and that the partner had also

**Table 2.** Number of target and non-target animals in multi-animal households

	Dog	Other
Target	13	3
Non-target	9	14

physically threatened the pets (n = 17). Most also reported that their partner had verbally (n = 22) and physically (n = 20) abused one or more animals in the household (Table 3).

### Types of abuse

There were several different forms of abuse (Table 4). All 26 callers (100%) responded to the question about physical abuse of the animals, with 20 (77%) reporting that this had occurred (Table 4). Seven callers (27%) reported animals dying, five of them because of abuse by the male partner. Six chickens were decapitated with an axe by a partner, one dog was kicked causing severe spinal and internal injuries requiring euthanasia, one dog was starved to death, one dog was hung from a hook and hit repeatedly, requiring euthanasia, one dog died after apparently being poisoned by the partner, and a cat and a dog were euthanased because of problems finding suitable housing when the woman fled the violence. When asked whether their partner had threatened to harm or kill the pets if the woman ever left, one caller declined to answer. Of the remaining 25 callers, 8 (32%) answered positively.

Behavioural changes in animals that had lived in households with IPV were reported by 22 of the 26 respondents (85%) (Table 5). Callers were asked to describe the nature of the changes. Two callers (8%) were unsure if there had been behavioural changes and another two callers (8%) said they had not noticed behavioural changes. Most callers (16; 73% of those noticing behavioural changes) reported that

**Table 3.** Number of respondents reporting threats and abuse of animals by partners

	Threats	Abuse	Total
Physical	17/23 (88%)	20/26 (77%)	37
Verbal	15/22 (68%)	22/24 (92%)	37
Total	32	42	

The numerator indicates the number of respondents reporting the threat or abuse and the denominator is the total number of respondents answering the question about threats or abuse. Fisher's exact test,  $P = 0.80$ .

**Table 4.** Predominant forms of physical abuse in respondents reporting animal abuse by a male partner

Type of physical abuse	No. of women reporting animal abuse (n = 20) <sup>a</sup>
Kicking	8
Hitting/punching	7
Abusive holding (e.g. holding by ears or hanging)	4
Throwing/shoving	5
Belting	2
Poisoning	2
Decapitation	1

<sup>a</sup>Several respondents reported multiple forms of physical abuse of the animal.

**Table 5. Predominant forms of behavioural changes in dogs, noticed and reported by respondents**

Type of behavioural change	No. of women reporting behavioural change of the dog (n = 22) <sup>a</sup>
Frightened/cowering/timid	17
Running away	7
Fearful/avoiding male partner/men	6
Aggression to male partner (dogs)	6
Proximity seeking to woman	6
Hiding	5

<sup>a</sup>Some animals were reported to show a range of these behaviours.

the change was long-term, persisting longer than the IPV event, whereas only six (27%) said it was short-term and seen whenever the male partner was present ( $\chi^2 = 4.5$ ,  $P = 0.03$ ). Of the six who reported only short-term changes, four reported that the behavioural changes were only associated with IPV events.

The majority of callers (n = 18; 69%) did not know about domestic violence pet accommodation services. On being asked whether knowing about the pet accommodation service would have resulted in the caller and the pets leaving the household, 17 callers (65% of the total number of callers) said they still would not have left, four (15%) said they would have left, three (12%) said they may have left and two (8%) declined to answer this question.

Only two callers (8%) had confided in a veterinarian about their pet's abuse. The main reasons that the other 24 (92%) did not confide in a veterinarian were that they did not feel able to speak to veterinarians about animal abuse (n = 7; 27%); that they were afraid of repercussions from their partner (n = 6; 23%); that they believed that veterinarians would be judgmental or not believe them (n = 4; 15%) or that they felt ashamed of the abuse (n = 2; 8%).

## Discussion

Women in this study comprised the majority of companion animal owners or carers, consistent with other Australian data.<sup>23</sup> The study was designed for a self-selected group of eligible people to take part in a semi-structured survey, in which both quantitative data (such as the number and type of pets owned) and qualitative information (such as the nature of behavioural changes noticed) were reported. Qualitative research has been largely overlooked in veterinary science,<sup>24</sup> but it is widely utilised in human-animal relationships research.<sup>9,14</sup> This study used self-selection and self-reporting by participants, which raises the issue of validity of reporting; however, we believe it is unlikely that respondents exaggerated the scale or extent of their partners' abuse. On the contrary, women victims of IPV may attempt to deny or minimise the abuse<sup>25</sup> and even after leaving, continue to feel an emotional bond toward the partner.<sup>26</sup> There was no incentive offered by the researchers for participation.

The study has a number of limitations, including the small sample size and the self-selection bias of the sample population. As a result, the

sample is not representative of the wider population of families that experience IPV, limiting the ability to generalise any findings to the wider IPV population. However, the small number of respondents should not be taken as an indication that this level of animal involvement in IPV rarely occurs. Although some women may be unwilling to confide in a stranger about the abuse, in the current study all participants spoke positively of being part of a survey on IPV and the effect on animals. Victims of IPV are often denied social interaction and once away from the violent relationship value the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their experiences.<sup>26</sup> The ability of women to participate may have been restricted by lack of awareness of the study or being unable to telephone during the hours advertised by the researcher, but we believe that the results provide a valid exploration of some of the risks to animals exposed to IPV.

Women who identified as owners of animals may have self-selected to participate in the survey because the advertising material asked for people who had owned pets, rather than just lived with pets at the time of the violent relationship, and this could be a source of potential bias. Women often have a stronger emotional bond and empathy towards animals than do men,<sup>27,28</sup> and this may be even more pronounced in households with IPV in which women and animals share the common experience of abuse. The emotional bond may increase an animal's likelihood of being targeted for abuse, because by hurting the animal the abuse perpetrator is able to exert coercive control over the woman. This proposal is consistent with studies reporting that perpetrators may use violence toward animals as a method of achieving power and control over their victims.<sup>14,15</sup>

In multi-animal households, dogs were the most commonly targeted species for abuse. Reasons for this may include the proximity of the animal (living within the household), their relative inability to flee from aversive stimuli, especially if confined or otherwise restrained (e.g. by a chain<sup>29</sup>) and the small size of some dogs enabling abusive acts, such as throwing, easy to perform. A tendency to obey their abuser submissively (which may reinforce the violent partner's role as the dominant member of the household) or conversely aggressively challenging the perpetrator may also influence a dog's likelihood of being targeted. Both aggressive and submissive behaviours are observed in anxious dogs.<sup>30</sup>

The dog's sex and age during the violent relationship were not found to be a factor in determining the likelihood of being targeted for abuse in the current study. However, a UK study found that most abused dogs seen by veterinarians were male and less than 2 years old.<sup>31</sup>

Behavioural changes in the animals in this study were often long-term, with commonly reported issues such as fear of men and anxiety persisting longer than the IPV relationship and sometimes for the entire life of the animal. The ability of these animals to assimilate to life in a foster home, animal shelter or boarding kennel is therefore likely to be compromised. Fear and anxiety are common emotions in dogs, and the family dynamics may contribute to anxiety.<sup>30</sup> This study suggests that these may derive from IPV as well as separation. Veterinarians in practice may encounter behavioural signs and physical injuries that suggest the animal may have been abused. The animal may show fear and anxiety toward their abuser and urinate, vocalise and defecate when in their presence or, conversely, may lick their hand.<sup>32</sup> Physical

injuries will vary according to the method of abuse and weapon used. Repetitive injuries presenting as multiple injuries at various stages of healing are most pathognomonic for abuse.<sup>32</sup> By combining the veterinary skills of physical examination, behavioural observation and history taking with an understanding of the issues surrounding IPV, veterinarians will be better able to detect and help these animals. All staff at veterinary clinics should have knowledge of IPV human and pet support services in their area and have contact telephone numbers for referral. Information about these services could also be advertised by brochures or posters in the clinic waiting room to alert clients that staff are sensitive to the issues of IPV. It is essential to maintain client confidentiality in cases of IPV, as women who confide in professionals may be at increased risk of harm if their partner discovers that she has spoken about the abuse.<sup>33</sup>

Most women in the current study were not aware of, and were unwilling to use, emergency pet accommodation services to enable them to flee a violent partner, citing attachment to the animal as the main reason. A recommendation from this study is that, for maximum emotional support during rehabilitation from violence, women, children and animals be housed together if at all possible. Table 5 shows that some pets showed increased proximity seeking to the woman and fear and avoidance of the male partner. Housing both women and pets together after the common experience of abuse would enable the emotional bond and a semblance of routine to be maintained during a time of stress. Increased promotion of accommodation options for women and animals fleeing violence is also needed.

Despite veterinarians being trained in animal health and welfare, few women chose to confide in them about the animal abuse. Women experiencing IPV live with a combination of chronic and acute stress<sup>34</sup> and, rather than seek help, many of these women remain silent and attempt to cope alone with the violence over a long period of time.<sup>35</sup> In one study, researchers found that there was a lower standard of veterinary care (both routine and emergency) of animals owned by women experiencing IPV compared with a community sample.<sup>9</sup> Male control over the woman's finances and social access is common in IPV<sup>16</sup> and may have contributed to some animals in the current study being treated at home by the woman.

Fear of repercussions if the partner discovered she had divulged the abuse is well recognised.<sup>33</sup> Despite some women stating that they felt unable to confide in anybody during the violent relationship, veterinarians were largely perceived in a negative manner, and were seen as disbelieving and judgmental. For support services to be better able to meet the needs of both animal and human victims of violence, it is essential for veterinarians to be approachable, knowledgeable and non-judgmental when dealing with suspected cases of abuse. A survey of Australian veterinarians found that only 7% believed that veterinary schools provide adequate training in animal abuse prevention.<sup>36</sup> Training in the area of interpersonal violence and animal abuse should be included in veterinary school curricula, just as many medical schools include instruction in family violence.<sup>37</sup> This training could be made available to practising veterinarians via Continuing Education workshops and seminars. Ideally, these training programmes would be developed in conjunction with social workers experienced in family violence and animal abuse. If veterinarians are trained to play a greater

role in the detection and treatment of animal abuse, then the public should be made aware of their skills in this area.

### Conclusions

This study found that animals were additional victims of violence in environments where IPV is perpetrated, in some instances with fatal outcomes. In this study, women were the main carers or owners of most target animals, which may have been as a result of the specific inclusion criterion that required ownership at the time of the violence. However, it has also been postulated that to achieve power and control, violence may be targeted at those animals to which women are strongly attached.<sup>14</sup> It was also found that dogs were more likely to be targets of abuse as a proportion of the pet population.

Many respondents were not aware of the animal support services available in the community. These services should increase community awareness in order to help more people and animals in need. A substantial number of women would not discuss the issue of IPV and animal abuse with a veterinarian, despite veterinarians being trained in animal health and welfare. By increasing the veterinary profession's knowledge of issues surrounding IPV and animal abuse, better support to human and animal victims of violence can be offered.

### Conflict of interest statement

None of the authors has any financial or personal relationships that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the paper.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The laughing vet: anecdotes from a rural practice.** D. Danalis. Sid Harta Publishers, Melbourne, 2011. 282 pages. Price A\$29.94. ISBN 978 1 92164 249 4.

This book is a collection of the author's experiences, Dr Dion Danalis, who graduated in veterinary science from The University of Queensland in 1965 subsequent to an education in animal husbandry with a diploma from Gatton College. Within weeks of graduation he established a rural practice at Mildura in north-west Victoria with some assistance from the local dairy company. Such assistance was not uncommon in that era to encourage graduates into the field. After seven years in Mildura he returned to Brisbane, establishing a small animal practice in partnership with his brother, from which he retired in 2005. Apart from the small animals, the Danalis brothers were very much involved in the business of obtaining and exporting stock, mainly cattle and goats, to South-East Asia and Pacific Islands.

The book is divided into an introduction and sixty two chapters which vary from one to nine pages each. There are reproductions of twelve photographs.

It is great credit to Dr Danalis to have made this effort to record some of his experiences and, hopefully, it may stimulate other

graduates to do the same, as not many have made the effort previously. He does not exhibit the skill of James Herriot in his story telling, despite similar subject matter. There is no chronology in the presentation of events and the locations are anonymous. He quotes the old problem of having asked a client, 'What is wrong with the dog?', only to deserve the eternal reply, 'I am paying you to tell me.' A situation we have all faced.

The pictorial reproductions are unfortunately second rate, mostly due to poor photography, but some have deteriorated in the reproduction to print. At least he tried, and it should be encouragement to all veterinarians to carry a digital camera, now that it is so easy to record and what they what they encounter with today's technology.

What else can be said? *The laughing vet* is a fun read.

**RP Knight**

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