

Can vets help fight domestic violence by identifying pet abuse?

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Pet abuse and domestic violence are closely linked. Animals can't talk but University of Sydney vet Dr Lydia Tong has shown vets how to tell the difference between bone fractures caused by accidents and those caused by abuse. Her fracture identification methods are giving vets the added confidence to identify cases of violence against pets and could serve as a warning of domestic violence.

Now, in a new study with Domestic Violence NSW, Lydia is looking deeper into the connections between animal abuse and [domestic violence](#) to assess the need for better services to protect both human and animal victims.

"Around 70% of women escaping violent homes also report pet abuse," says Lydia. "So vets are often the first to see evidence of abuse in a family, when they treat injured pets."

"Different forces on bones can tell a story—the skeleton of an animal keeps a distinct record that indicates the force applied to bones from past

injuries, breaks or fractures. But it can often be difficult for vets to say with [confidence](#) whether a fracture has resulted from abuse or accident."

To give vets this confidence, in a 2014 study, Lydia collected cases of abused dogs who were punched, hit with a blunt weapon or kicked, and examined the fractures from these injuries. She then compared these fractures to those caused by genuine accidents. Her results, published in *The Veterinary Journal*, identified five key features of fractures that vets could look for to distinguish [accidents](#) from abuse.

Now, having given vets this reference to diagnose abuse, Lydia and her colleagues at The University of Sydney are gathering more information on the connections between domestic violence and animal abuse.

"We already know that many women will delay seeking shelter if their pets are threatened or can't be housed along with them," explains Lydia.

"US studies also tell us that domestic violence perpetrators who also abuse pets are more dangerous—they have increased rates of physical and sexual violence and stalking, and are more likely to kill their partner.

"We need to know more about the relationship between animal and human abuse in Australia so that we can recognise abuse earlier, save lives, and provide appropriate services for victims and their pets."

Lydia and her colleagues at the University of Sydney are working with Domestic Violence NSW to survey victims of domestic violence who are also pet owners.

"Perpetrators of violence will often threaten to abuse or harm family pets as a way to exert control" says Moo Baulch, CEO of Domestic

Violence NSW.

"This research is essential because we need to have a much clearer picture of the connections between domestic and family violence and the [abuse](#) of animals.

"Building a solid evidence base in this area will assist policymakers, domestic and [family violence](#) services and people working with animals to better respond to the needs of women and children with pets who are experiencing violence and are afraid to leave."

Lydia and her team are keen to hear from other domestic violence support agencies, services or refuges that would be willing to be involved with this study.

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