

Dealing with suspected dog fight injuries

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Since qualifying in 2009, I have worked in a variety of hospitals and seen hundreds of dog bite injuries reported as accidental. But how do we, as veterinary professionals, really know this to be the case?



Dog fighting victims tend to have a series of healed wounds. IMAGE: ASPCA.

I, myself, never wondered about this until recently, but since then I have become involved in dog fighting cases themselves, as well as research, assessments, organisations dealing with investigations and, most importantly, plans of action to end dog fighting in the UK.

Organised dog fighting in communities

Organised dog fighting is more common than you may think. Whether it takes place in a park, bedroom or man-made pit, it is happening on a daily basis (League Against Cruel Sports, 2016).

Therefore, while you might think you do not see organised dog fight victims, or it doesn't affect your area or community, it does – and in more ways than you could possibly imagine.

You may also feel there is nothing you can do about this, but the fact is, you can – we all can. From my attendance at animal welfare debates in Parliament, it seems to me MPs get more letters about

animal welfare – particularly dog fighting – than any other. It is a situation that should concern us all.

Organised dog fighting is associated with serious animal and human welfare issues, which cause an abusive and dangerous domino effect. For example, it is known to be a gateway for crime, as well as a predictor of some of the most serious violent crimes in the community.

This includes gang-related culture and abuse, as well as the unimaginable suffering of the animals involved.

It should be noted, while the physical suffering of dog victims is evidently extreme, the mental effects are also extremely damaging. It is not just dogs, too – other animals, such as cats, also suffer in dog fights, as they are frequently being used as bait.

Identifying injuries

Panel 1. Dog fight types (League Against Cruel Sports, 2017)

Level one – street rolls: often spontaneous one-on-one fights in urban parks and housing estates, without much planning, rules or training involved.

Level two – hobbyist: often gang-affiliated with gambling involved and some training and rules followed, but at a lower level than professional fights.

Level three – professional: sophisticated dog rings with highly trained dogs of reputable bloodlines, following strict rules and, therefore, requiring the highest level of organisation.

Those participating in dog fighting do not generally visit the vet, but when they do, explanations of their dog's injuries will be required and the owners will be aware staff are likely to be suspicious.

When looking at suspected organised dog fight injuries, they should be easy to spot as a significant difference exists between these and those of a spontaneous nature, such as:

- the pattern of injuries
- associated tissue damage
- stages of healing

Body wound maps and percentages of scars over certain areas of the body, meanwhile, will indicate the intent behind the fight.

Dogs involved in intentional fighting may present with wounds in different stages of healing, as well as numerous scars.

Puncture wounds or tearing injuries are often seen on the forelimbs, chest, neck and face (Merck, 2013). In some instances, fresh or old fractures may also be diagnosed in the forelimbs and jaw.

Dogs brought to a clinic will habitually be “street roller” fight victims, as those involved in “professional” dog fights are more likely to carry out required veterinary treatment themselves or, even, dispose of the dog (**Panel 1**).

Teeth, meanwhile, may have evidence of human intervention, such as being filed to sharp points or, at the other end of the spectrum, could have been filed flat to protect the opposing dog. Full mouth extractions may even be apparent.

The mouth and mucosa, meanwhile, may be damaged from objects used to separate dogs (Merck, 2013), more on which will be explored in part two.

Dogs that have given a submissive posture during a fight will often have injuries to the abdomen, groin or rump. As these tend to be far more evidential to an owner – especially one who has “rolled” his or her dog just a few times and is now feeling the latest injuries warrant treatment – indications of previous injury may exist to look for in the clinic.

These dogs would likely be considered “not good enough” for professional fighters and, therefore, disposed of (Merck, 2013).

Other considerations



Numerous scars are common on dogs used for regular fighting. IMAGE: Scottish SPCA.

Evidence gathering is vital when faced with a victim of intentional cruelty, including an accurate history and note taking. While more details on this will be provided in part two, here are some basic pointers:

- Check the previous history in detail – take a look at the full details and ensure they match the address and photographic ID, as this could flag up a previous ban on keeping animals.
- Ask in-depth and direct questions to the person responsible for the dog when he or she enters the practice – who owns the dog? When did the incident happen? How? Where? Who was present? The other dog? Previous occurrences?
- Other regular veterinary treatment? Other animals? Is the dog registered?
- Keep an eye on the owner's behaviour during questioning, as well as the dog's behaviour with the owner/handler – does the former seem uncomfortable, and does the latter seem scared/aggressive/submissive?
- Scan for a microchip and check registration details – is the dog stolen?
- Take good-quality clinical notes, records and photographic evidence.
- Ensure the safety of the staff and clinic to the best of your ability.
- Ensure your reporting process is up to scratch – there is the practice manager, RCVS, Veterinary Defence Society, police (on the non-emergency 101 telephone number), League Against Cruel Sports Animal Crimewatch (as appropriate) and RSPCA (more on this in part two).

There also appears to be an assumption of a supposed link between pit bull-type dogs and those involved in dog fighting. However, this is frequently unfounded.



Injuries seen in dog fight victims can be extremely sore, and, in some cases, life-threatening. IMAGE: RSPCA.

Meanwhile, the BVA has stated it is not up to veterinary professionals to decide the breed or type of dog seen, as it is our ultimate role to ensure the welfare of that dog, regardless of breed or type.

Our responsibility is exactly the same as any other dog in need of veterinary care, as any assumptions can be detrimental to the victim already involved. For more information, visit www.thesaveabulls.org

Conclusion

Illegal dog fighting victims will enter our clinics and we must know how to a) identify them and b) act appropriately with protection for yourself and the victim(s) involved. This will not only prevent the dog(s) from further suffering, but also protect the community.

While this area is well developed in the US – as it is considered a felony in all 50 states – sadly, it will only continue to grow here in the UK if it goes without our intervention.

With the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee keen to increase animal cruelty penalties to five years and establish an animal abuse register (Hubbard, 2016), there is the incentive for us

to report and, therefore, be able to protect our patients.

References

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