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Veterinarians' Duty to Report in Cases of Suspected Animal Abuse

The mission of the veterinarian in Israel, defined in the Veterinarians Law of 1991, does not regulate the duty of medical confidentiality or the duty to report in cases where there is a reasonable suspicion of animal abuse or neglect. These issues are not regulated even within the framework of the Israeli Animal Welfare (Animal Protection) Act of 1994 or in any other law in Israel. Unlike in veterinary medicine, the duty to report has been established in the field of human medicine in cases of harm inflicted upon the helpless or of domestic violence, through primary legislation, regulations and a large number of procedures, notices and training of staff from a variety of fields.

In recent years, a direct link between violence against animals and violence against helpless people has been recognized – one is indicative of the other and often precedes it. Simultaneously, recent decades have been characterized by a dramatic rise in legislation protecting animals and promoting their welfare. Both of these trends have led to a change in legislation in many countries, regulating the duty of the veterinary staff to report abuse and/or neglect to the authorities. This has been done for a dual purpose – to ensure the welfare of animals and to detect cases of domestic violence and violence against the helpless as early as possible. Another step, which has been taken in the United States, is to turn acts of violence against animals into a federal crime. This change in legislation leads to more severe punishment and to the tracking of animal violence, similarly to other violent crimes against human beings.

In this paper, we examine global changes in legislation regarding the veterinary staff's duty to report animal abuse to authorities; compare existing legislation in the field of human medicine and veterinary medicine; and discuss the situation in Israel along with a proposal to change the current legislation.