



## TEACHING TARGET

ANIMAL CRUELTY IS THE MOST COMMON ISSUE REQUIRING VETERINARY FORENSIC EXPERTISE, AND MANY OPPORTUNITIES ARE NOW AVAILABLE FOR VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS. LEARN WHAT TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE IS NEEDED TO BREAK INTO THIS UNIQUE VETERINARY CAREER.

An ongoing series

# Career Opportunities in Veterinary Forensic Medicine

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There is a tremendous need for veterinary expertise in legal cases involving animals. Veterinary forensic science and medicine can be used in a variety of criminal and non-criminal legal cases, including animal cruelty, wildlife crimes, and animal attacks, and civil issues such as veterinary malpractice claims or divorce disputes, and may play an important role in human-related criminal investigations when the case involves potential animal evidence. The law enforcement community has recently recognized the importance of investigating animal abuse and now tracks these cases just like homicides, arson, and assault,<sup>1</sup> which has increased the interest and need for veterinary forensic assistance with these cases.

## What Is Veterinary Forensics?

Veterinary forensic medicine is the application of veterinary medicine to answer questions of interest in legal cases. Veterinary forensic science is the application of a broad spectrum of sciences to answer questions of legal interest involving animals. The term *veterinary forensics* is used to cover both aspects (see **Definitions**, page 42).

Veterinarians and veterinary nurses can play many roles in alleged cases of animal abuse, creating unique part- or full-time career opportunities based on their training and experience. Such opportunities include work in shelters, private practices, diagnostic laboratories, animal welfare organizations, or government agencies responsible for animal issues, and may include tasks such as animal examinations, animal handling, crime scene investigation assistance, expert witness testimony, and case review support. Education and training on veterinary forensics, which is widely available, is therefore important for a practice team (see **Resources**, page 43).

Animal cruelty is the most common issue requiring veterinary forensics, and being able to identify agencies with the authority to conduct animal abuse investigations (eg, local municipal shelters, law enforcement

agencies, state and federal wildlife departments, state and federal departments of agriculture) is important.

Investigations are always headed up by law enforcement officers or other designated individuals (eg, animal control officers, humane law enforcement officers) who may need to work in conjunction with sworn law enforcement officers who have arrest powers. A municipal animal shelter may or may not have the authority to investigate such crimes. Animal welfare organizations may offer assistance at the request of local, state, or federal authorities.

### **Municipal Animal Shelters**

Most animal cruelty cases are investigated by municipal animal shelter officers (eg, animal control officers) or local law enforcement. Law enforcement may rely on the municipal animal shelter to examine and house the animals. If the shelter does not have full-time veterinary team members with forensics training, the animal victim may need to be examined by a nearby private practice. Those working or volunteering at shelters can obtain more education and training in veterinary forensics to offer greater support to investigators, creating potential career opportunities.

### **Private Practices**

Many municipal animal shelters do not have personnel with the veterinary forensics skills and expertise needed for every case because of financial constraints. In these cases, consultants can be retained to assist with cases as needed, or specific private practice team members can be identified to perform veterinary forensic duties based on their training and experience.

Private practices offer the most career opportunities for those wanting to work in the animal forensic arena. Some jurisdictions may not see the value in hiring a forensic consultant, so qualified practitioners should consider assisting a case free of charge, which will demonstrate the value of adding forensic expertise to a case and educate the investigators and attorneys about veterinary forensics.

Volunteering assistance also offers an opportunity for veterinary team members to earn respect and trust and integrate into the team, because most investigators are used to working with a government team, such as law enforcement officers and medical examiners, and do not automatically involve outsiders.

## **Definitions**

*Veterinary forensics* may be applied for criminal and non-criminal animal legal cases, including animal cruelty, wildlife crimes, and animal attacks, and civil issues such as veterinary malpractice claims or divorce disputes. The term includes 2 areas:

- **Veterinary Forensic Medicine<sup>2</sup>:** The application of veterinary medical knowledge to answer questions of legal interest.
- **Veterinary Forensic Science<sup>3</sup>:** The discipline that applies veterinary science to answer questions of legal interest involving the treatment of animals.

**The law enforcement community has recently recognized the importance of investigating animal abuse and now tracks these cases just like homicides, arson, and assault.**

## Resources

Veterinary forensics education and training is available from books, websites, organizations that offer volunteer or employment opportunities, state and national veterinary or animal welfare organizations, and state and national conferences.

### Books:

- *Veterinary Forensics: Animal Cruelty Investigations*, 2nd ed. Merck M, ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell; 2012.
- *Color Atlas of Forensic Medicine and Pathology*, 2nd ed. Catanese C. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press; 2016.

### Education:

- For information about the veterinary forensic sciences graduate certificate and master's degree offered by University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine, visit [forensicscience.ufl.edu/veterinary](http://forensicscience.ufl.edu/veterinary)
- [VetFolio.com/forensics](http://VetFolio.com/forensics): veterinary forensic science and medicine and animal CSI certificate courses

### Organizations:

- American Humane Association: [americanhumane.org](http://americanhumane.org)
- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals: [aspca.org](http://aspca.org)
- Association for Prosecuting Attorneys/Animal Cruelty Division: [apainc.org/animal-cruelty](http://apainc.org/animal-cruelty)
- Best Friends Animal Society: [bestfriends.org](http://bestfriends.org)
- Humane Society of the United States: [humanesociety.org](http://humanesociety.org)
- Humane Society of the United States Animal Expo: [animalsheltering.org/expo](http://animalsheltering.org/expo)
- Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association: [hsvma.org](http://hsvma.org) (HSVMA also offers free webinars to its members at [hsvma.org/webinars#recordings](http://hsvma.org/webinars#recordings))
- International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association: [ivfsa.org](http://ivfsa.org)
- Society for Wildlife Forensic Science: [wildlifeforensicscience.org](http://wildlifeforensicscience.org)

### Websites:

- [USAjobs.gov](http://USAjobs.gov)
- [VeterinaryForensics.com](http://VeterinaryForensics.com)

## Animal Welfare Organizations

Animal welfare organizations may or may not have the authority to investigate animal cruelty, depending on the law that designates such authority, and most become involved by providing assistance to agencies charged with cruelty investigations.

Many national animal welfare organizations have departments that specialize in animal cruelty assistance with large-scale cases involving hoarding, puppy mills, and animal fighting. These organizations offer employment opportunities and paid consultant roles and may also have volunteer response teams. Volunteering with these organizations is an excellent way to gain experience, develop contacts, and explore career options. Local welfare organizations may offer the same opportunities.

## Government Agencies

Several state and federal agencies may need forensic veterinary expertise for pathologic examinations, investigations and inspections, and cases involving large animals, wildlife, and exotics. Agencies may include a state veterinary diagnostic laboratory, a state department of agriculture, the US Department of Agriculture, and state and federal fish and wildlife departments.

## Volunteering with animal shelters is an excellent way to gain forensics experience, develop contacts, and explore career options.

### Establishing Fees

Consultant fees for forensics can vary based on the type of work and agency. Fees can be set hourly or daily and may include travel time and related expenses; for example, services that involve investigations at the scene and large-scale cases are often set at a daily rate. Fees should be reasonable and based on training and experience. They may follow the average rate for relief work in veterinary practices.

Finances are an important consideration for government agencies, so the rate may need to accommodate

their budget. Most shelters' budgets include veterinary team members at a standard pay scale, which can be used as a fee guideline.

### Conclusion

Working in veterinary forensics can be highly rewarding because the field is a natural expansion of the investigative mindset used in clinical veterinary medicine and the desire for justice for animals. Many cases present emotional challenges but investigative team members provide much-needed support.

The entire veterinary team should be educated and trained in some measure of veterinary forensics and animal cruelty so they can recognize and respond to suspected abuse; this education may pique special interest and lead to unexpected, exciting career opportunities. ■



### TEAM TAKEAWAYS:

**Veterinarians:** Many animal shelters and state agencies do not have veterinary forensic specialists on staff, so there are opportunities for veterinarians to consult with these agencies or offer their practices to provide services.

**Management Team:** Managers should help set fees when veterinarians assist outside veterinary forensic officers and also recognize the value of volunteering for agencies needing their expertise.

**Nursing Team:** Forensics roles also exist for veterinary nurses, who can either volunteer or consult with entities such as animal welfare agencies, local shelters, diagnostic laboratories, and state and federal agencies.

**Client Care Team:** Although client care team members cannot actually take part in investigations, they can help facilitate relationships with law enforcement and other agencies.

### References

1. Tracking Animal Cruelty. FBI Collecting Data on Crimes Against Animals. The FBI. February 2016. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2016/february/tracking-animal-cruelty>. Accessed March 2016.
2. Forensic medicine. Online Medical Dictionary. <http://www.online-medical-dictionary.org/definitions-f/forensic-medicine.html>. Accessed March 2016.
3. Forensic science. Online Medical Dictionary. <http://www.online-medical-dictionary.org/definitions-f/forensic-science.html>. Accessed March 2016.