



E19 Veterinary Forensics and Large Animal Deaths

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the role of the forensic veterinarian in preventing and uncovering abuse, inhumane destruction of animals, and their relationship to insurance fraud and animal cruelty.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the importance of veterinary forensic techniques to help solve cases. Practical applications including scene photos, necropsy findings, and veterinary records will be presented with an emphasis on a 2008 case as well as cases from 1973 to 1992.

Prior to 1932, four states had felony laws for animal abuse. In 1966, a federal law regulating the treatment of animals in research and exhibition was passed. In 1986, veterinary forensics was recognized pertaining to insults inflicted on humans by animals and on animals by humans. Soon after, animal cruelty was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition (DSM III) as a mental disorder. In 1988, the United States National Fish and Wildlife Lab in Ashland, OR, was established as the crime laboratory for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

By 2000, 25 states had made animal abuse a felony. In 2006 and 2007, three texts pertaining to animal forensic investigations were published and the Michael Vick dog fighting case was in the news. In the Vick case, search warrants resulted in the discovery of six to eight dogs buried in two mass graves. Consequent bone evidence indicated dog fighting which provided key evidence in the Vick case.

In 2008, the International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association (IVFSA) was formed. Conferences and training in veterinary forensics began to be offered at the University of Florida. By 2014, all 50 states had made animal abuse a felony and 43 states had made animal abuse a felony on the first offense. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) added animal cruelty as a category in the agency Uniform Crime Report.¹

On May 23, 2008, in Escambia County, AL, a neighbor saw smoke and reported a barn fire. By the time firefighters arrived, the barn and hay were fully engulfed. As they began to check for hot spots, they noticed that among the charred remnants of a stall was a deceased horse. Here collaboration and cooperation were key. The fire department realized this was a complicated scene and notified the Alabama State Veterinarian and the Alabama State Fire Marshall.

A member of the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries arrived on scene, and performed a gross exam and preliminary necropsy. He noted free blood in the chest cavity, which would not be normal in death due to fire. The horse's body was then taken by police escort to the Auburn University Diagnostic Laboratory for a complete necropsy. Two bullet wounds were identified, resulting in shrapnel and a bullet being recovered from the horse's heart. The case continued to develop and on June 10, 2008 the owner was charged with multiple counts of felony attempted theft by deception, arson, and animal cruelty.

In other cases, from 1973 to 1992, a substantial number of expensive race horses and show horses were brutally abused and inhumanely destroyed. Horses were killed in ten states. Only with the 1989 re-opening of the murder investigation of the candy heiress, Helen Vorhees Brach, was much of this brought to light. These cases led to 36 indictments and 35 convictions of fraud and cruelty.²⁻⁴

Dogs and cats account for 64% and 18% of cruelty cases, respectively, while the remainder involve cruelty



to horses and livestock. In 2010, a \$6 million (euro) insurance fraud scheme involving pets was uncovered in the United Kingdom.⁵ Veterinarians must show where human forensics can apply to animals and work diligently to learn more about the differences between human and veterinary forensic pathology.

Reference(s):

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3. Englade K. *Hot Blood: The Money, the Brach Heiress, the Horse Murders*. New York: MacMillan. 1997.
4. Sportsillustrated.cnn.com <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1004483/1/index.htm#ixzz14UziZi6y>).
5. Taylor J. Abandoned! Are Britain's pet the lasts victims of the credit crunch? Home News-UK. *The Independent*. 2008 May 20.

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