

Animal abuse and interpersonal violence from the perspective of veterinarians from Paraíba State, Brazil

Maus-tratos aos animais e violência interpessoal sobre a perspectiva dos Médicos Veterinários do Estado da Paraíba, Brasil

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Highlights

Four of 10 veterinarians do not follow updates to professional legislation.

Most veterinarians do not report the crime of animal abuse.

Almost half of the veterinarians do not know the legislation of animal abuse.

Veterinarians believe in the link between animal abuse and interpersonal violence.

Abstract

This study aimed to obtain information about the knowledge and attitudes of veterinarians in the state of Paraíba, Brazil, regarding the care of abused animals, the profile of possible aggressors, and their perceptions of the relationship between animal maltreatment and interpersonal violence. For this purpose, an online survey containing 21 questions was made available to veterinarians registered in the Regional Veterinary Medicine Council of Paraíba (CRMV - PB). The chi-square test with a 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$) was used for statistical analysis. According to the interviewees, 70.7% (53/75) of the abuse victims were small animals. Negligence (68% [51/75]) and the absence of medical care (68% [51/75]) were the most evident forms of abuse. Furthermore, 82.7% (62/75) of them believed in the relationship between animal maltreatment and interpersonal violence. In addition, 90.7% (68/75) of the interviewees responded that they have not experienced technical difficulty in identifying maltreatment. However, 48% (36/75) stated to not know the animal abuse law, 90.7% (68/75) did not report the aggressors, and 81.3% (61/75) stated

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that the absence of measures by the competent public bodies makes it harder to report the abuse. This study concluded that these professionals will, at some point in their clinical routine, encounter situations of animal maltreatment and human violence, as they are in a privileged position to identify such acts. However, they need more normative knowledge about animal abuse crimes.

Key words: Animal mistreatment. Collective veterinary medicine. Domestic violence. Link theory. Legislation.

Resumo

Objetivou-se com esse estudo a obtenção de informações a respeito do conhecimento e atitudes dos Médicos Veterinários do estado da Paraíba, Brasil, acerca dos atendimentos de animais vítimas de maus-tratos, o perfil dos possíveis agressores e de suas percepções a respeito da conexão entre maus-tratos animais e violência interpessoal. Para tanto foi disponibilizada pesquisa online contendo 21 questões a todos Médicos Veterinários inscritos no Conselho Regional de Medicina Veterinária da Paraíba (CRMV-PB). Para análise estatística foi utilizado o teste de Qui-quadrado com nível de significância de 5% ($p < 0,05$). Segundo os Médicos Veterinários entrevistados, 70,7% (53/75) das vítimas de maus-tratos eram pequenos animais, sendo a negligência [68% (51/75)] e a ausência de atendimento médico [68% (51/75)] os maus-tratos mais evidenciados. Adicionalmente, 82,7% (62/75) deles acreditavam na conexão entre maus-tratos animais e violência interpessoal e 90,7% (68/75) responderam não sentir dificuldade técnica em identificar maus-tratos, porém, 48% (36/75) não conheciam a lei que trata sobre os maus-tratos animais, 90,7% (68/75) não realizaram denúncia contra os agressores, e 81,3% (61/75) afirmaram que a ausência de providências por parte dos órgãos públicos competentes dificulta a denúncia. Conclui-se que esses profissionais irão em algum momento de sua rotina clínica se deparar com situações de maus-tratos a animais e violência humana, pois estão em posição privilegiada para identificar tais atos, entretanto, precisam de mais conhecimento normativo sobre os crimes de maus-tratos aos animais.

Palavras-chave: Maus-tratos animais. Medicina Veterinária do coletivo. Violência doméstica. Teoria do elo. Legislação.

Introduction

Animal abuse is part of the family and community violence spectrum and must be considered one of the main public health problems worldwide (Gullone, 2012). The occurrence of animal abuse can be used as a marker for child abuse, family violence, and violent criminal behavior (Ascione et al., 2007; Bright, Hug, Spencer, Applebaum, & Hardt, 2018). Both the abuse of pets and that of production animals are frequently addressed as the components of an intimidating behavior

used by individuals who commit the violence against their intimate partners, children, and the elderly. The abuses serve as a means to dominate, control, and induce fear and subservience in their victims, impeding battered women and their children to attempt to leave these abusive situations (Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Arkow, 2015).

The recognition of the link between the animal abuse and family violence began to require a greater awareness of the issue on the part of the professional of human services

and of animal well-being, in addition to more training and crossed studies between them (Flynn, 2000). However, little attention has been given to the identification of the risk factors and protection associated with the maltreatment of dogs and cats in the family environment. The understanding of these determinants is of utmost importance for the development of prevention and control strategies, which reduce the presence of negative interactions of the human-animal bond. Therefore, a veterinary doctor is an essential professional responsible not only for the animal care but also for the health and security of the people (Monsalve, Ferreira, & Garcia, 2017) because they are in a privileged position to identify such criminal attitudes against animals and human beings (Arkow & Nassaro, 2017).

A veterinarian is an advocate of the animal welfare, going beyond the treatment of lesions and diseases and including the recognition, response, and prevention of animal abuse (Arkow, 2015). In Canada, for example, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association declared that veterinarians have the "moral obligation" of reporting suspect cases of maltreatment of animals and that "the society has the obligation of supporting the veterinarians who report in good faith attitudes of maltreatment, using their professional judgment." Furthermore, to support that, the veterinary schools train their students to recognize and denounce animal abuse (Arkow, 2015).

In Brazil, a legislation that prohibits the maltreatment of animals exists (Lei nº 9.605, de 12 de fevereiro de 1998), and normative instruments oblige the veterinarians to report to authorities cases of animal maltreatment

(Conselho Federal de Medicina Veterinária [CFMV], 2016, 2018), so that the identification and communication of these abuses are accompanied by investigation and other kinds of crime (Benetato, Reisman, & McCobb, 2011). However, the perception of the veterinarians of their role in the intervention of the animal abuse and interpersonal violence and the level of the training that they receive on the subject during their academic qualification are not yet elucidated in Latin America (Monsalve et al., 2017).

Taking this issue as a starting point, this study aimed to obtain information about the knowledge of the veterinarians from the state of Paraíba, Brazil, concerning the consultations of animal maltreatment crimes and their attitudes when encountering such situations, the characterization of the possible animal aggressors, and if these professionals believe that there is a link between animal maltreatment and interpersonal violence.

Materials and Methods

This research was approved by the Ethics in Research with Human Beings Committee of the Alcides Carneiro University Hospital of the Federal University of Campina Grande (CAAE, 14518919.6.0000.5182; approval number, 3.464.377).

An online research was made available to all veterinarians of the state of Paraíba by the Regional Veterinary Medicine Council of Paraíba (CRMV-PB) on the website and by sending an institutional e-mail to each professional registered in the respective Council, besides being distributed with the support of the social networks. The research contained 21

questions and was available on the link <https://goo.gl/forms/vWhTzVQGJ2rCb7S72> during the period from July 28, 2019, to October 28, 2019. The research questions were developed by the authors themselves to meet the objectives of the study. By means of this research, the following data were collected: the social and demographic information of the veterinarians working in the state of Paraíba, the number of animals that were victims of maltreatment during their professional career, their attitudes when faced with animal abuse situations, and knowledge of the legislation on animal protection. This study also aimed to determine they believed in the existence of the relationship between animal maltreatment and interpersonal violence. The body of the research consisted mainly of short answers, from which the participants could select one or more options to represent their experiences and perceptions concerning animal abuse.

Only the answers to the questionnaire in which the interviewed veterinarians stated to have attended to animals in abuse conditions were included for analysis. Subsequently, the data obtained from the questionnaires were inserted into an electronic spreadsheet, and subsequently, the absolute and relative frequencies of each questioning were accounted for. For the evaluation of the frequencies, the chi-square adherence test was used. Crossings were also conducted between variables: sex of the veterinarian × modifications in the legislation, knowing how to denounce × has already denounced, knowledge of the legislation × has already denounced, and age of the aggressor × origin of the animal to verify a possible association using the chi-square test. Data were analyzed using SPSS 24 for MAC software at a 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$).

Results and Discussion

Of 1,763 veterinarians registered in the CRMV-PB, during the period of the research, 108 answered the questionnaire in due time for the analysis. Seventy-five of these were included in the study; the others were excluded because they did not meet the established criteria for inclusion. Most of the veterinarians were of the female sex (58.7% [44/75]), whereas 41.3% (31/75) of them were of the male sex. The greater proportion of those interviewed declared to work in the public sector (53.3% [0/75]) that had been working as professionals for up to 5 years (57.3%), and the majority of them had postgraduation courses (77.3% [58/75]) (Table 1).

Regarding the origin of the animal's victims of abuse, the respondents claimed to have attended to mainly stray animals (45.3% [34/75]), followed by domiciled (41.3% [31/75]) and community animals (8% [6/75]), and 5.3% (4/75) of those interviewed were not able to inform the origin of the animals attended to by them. Despite the observation that a greater frequency of abuses occurred in stray animals compared with that in domiciled ones, these were not discrepant, showing that regardless of the origin, animals have the same chances of experiencing maltreatment. However, it is notorious that non-domiciled animals are more exposed to unfavorable situations, especially water and food deprivation, lack of veterinary care, and intentional physical aggressions (Moutinho, Nascimento, & Paixão, 2015), demonstrating that the stray animals are more predisposed to situations of abuse, which may justify the difference in the frequencies shown earlier.

Table 1

Professional profile of the veterinarians who participated in the research between July and October 2019 who stated that they had attended animals that were victims of abuse during their career in the state of Paraíba, Brazil

Professional profile	N (75)	(%)
Sex		
Female	44	58.7%
Male	31	41.3%
Labor sector		
Public	40	53.3%
Private	18	24%
Liberal	9	12%
More than one sector	8	10.7%
Years of service		
Up to 5 years	43	57.3%
Over 5 years	32	42.7%
Academic qualification		
Only graduation	17	22.7%
Postgraduation	58	77.3%

In relation to the species that are victims of abuse, the veterinarians reported a greater frequency of exclusive assistance to small animals (dogs and cats), accounting for 70.7% (53/75) of the cases. A frequency of 29.3% (22/75) was obtained in the mixed clinical routine (dogs, cats, production, and wild and exotic animals), similar to the findings of Green and Gullone (2005) who found in interviews with Australian veterinarians a greater occurrence of animal abuse in dogs and cats, followed by other species. In both studies, it can be noticed that animal abuse was found in practically all species commonly attended to by veterinary doctors, showing that all animals are subject to these kinds

of practices. However, in relation to family violence, dogs and cats were found to be the most frequently affected species of animals because of the bond with humans and they are closer to them, being, therefore, easily subjugated to acts of violence, together with women, children, and the elderly (Ascione et al., 2007).

A list of various modalities of abuse was presented to the participants, and they could choose more than one option; therefore, the frequencies were distributed according to the number of times that they were marked by them. The results of these frequencies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Modalities and frequencies of abuse obtained from the options chosen in the questionnaire by the veterinarians who participated in the research between July and October 2019 in the state of Paraíba, Brazil

Modalities of abuse	N (75)	(%)
Absence of veterinary care	51	68%
Negligence	51	68%
Abandonment	45	60%
Poisoning	39	52%
Water and food deprivation	35	46.7%
Battering	32	42.7%
Lesion by firearms	30	40%
Lesion by bladed weapons	29	38.7%
Burns	16	21.3%
Excess of load/work	12	16%
Zoophilia	09	12%
Other	02	2.7%

Among the modalities of abuse evaluated, the absence of veterinary care (68% [51/75]), negligence (68% [51/75]), abandonment (60% [45/75]), and water and food deprivation (46.7% [35/75]) were placed separately in this work to better express such situations. However, all of them are considered as negligence (Vermeulen & Odendaal, 1993). Negligence is an act of omission (non-intentional), generally a continuous action or lack of action of the animal's owner or the person responsible for the animal for a long period of time (Merck, 2012). Thus becoming a marker, for their owners, the simultaneous occurrence of self-negligence and of a variety of mental disorders, for example, the accumulation of animals (Arkow & Nassaro, 2017), many times, is related to situations of social vulnerability (Garcia, 2017), and this category of maltreatment was the most mentioned in this study.

In relation to the cases of intentional cruelty against animals, these are frequently more disturbing because of the connection established between cruelty to animals and other forms of violence, such as domestic violence and child and elderly abuse (Kogan, Schoenfeld-Tacher, Hellyer, Rishniw, & Ruch-Gallie, 2017). Among the intentional cases listed in the questionnaire, the ones that had a greater proportion of observations by the veterinarians were the following: poisoning (52% [39/75]), battering (42.7% [32/75]), lesions by firearms (40% [30/75]), lesions by bladed weapons (38.7% [29/75]), burns (21.3% [16/75]), and zoophilia (12% [9/75]). Such frequencies portray the existence of different conditions of abuse observed by the veterinary doctors of the state of Paraíba in their clinical assistance routine, thus demonstrating that such situations are part of the everyday life of these professionals.

In this study, the veterinarians were not asked how they reached these diagnoses or if they had any academic preparation for the identification of maltreatments. However, Monsalve, Pereira, Leite, Polo and Garcia (2019) in a similar study observed that the majority of the veterinarians researched declared flaws in their training in veterinary forensic sciences and animal welfare sciences, which consequently may jeopardize the real diagnosis or animal abuse.

When asked if they believed in the existence of any relationship between animal abuse and violence against people, the majority of those interviewed answered yes (82.7% [62/75]), similar to several other studies (Green & Gullone, 2005; Williams, Dale, Clark, & Garret, 2008; Kogan et al., 2017; Monsalve et al., 2019). When questioned if during their medical services to animals that were victims of abuse, any of the owners had ever declared to be themselves victims of violence by the animal's aggressor, and 14.7% (11/75) of the respondents said that this had already happened. This ratifies the statement of Williams et al. (2008) who suggested that cruelty to animals is considered as an indicator of violence against humans because in homes where animals are maltreated, people are also at risk of being abused.

In the state of Pernambuco, northeast of Brazil, a research carried out with women victims of domestic violence attended by the women's protection police station demonstrated that in 49% of the cases, their animals had also been attacked (Padilha, 2011). This study observed that the frequency of the reporting the domestic violence to the veterinarians was much lower than that in studies in which the victims sought help from other professionals. Perhaps this may have

occurred because the role of the veterinarians in relation to the cycle of violence is still not recognized by the people who are victims of the abuse themselves (Hardesty, Khaw, Ridgway, Weber, & Miles, 2013). Despite the direct contact of the veterinarians with the alleged victims of domestic violence, at the moment of their animal's consultation, the majority of them are not willing to trust these professionals with the accounts of the situations that they have experienced (Tiplady, Walsh, & Phillips, 2012). This fact may justify the reduced frequency of accounts of domestic violence to the interviewed veterinary doctors.

When asked if they knew the sex of the abusers of the animals brought for consultation, the majority of those interviewed stated that they did not know (58.7% [44/75]); however, the male sex (37.3% [28/75]), compared with the female sex (4% [3/75]), was the most observed, which corroborates with other studies (Arkow & Nassaro, 2017; Scheffer & França, 2017). Regarding age, 54.7% (41/75) of the aggressors were aged >21 years, whereas 45.3% (34/75) were aged <21 years. This demonstrated that both young people and adults are responsible for animal abuse. In the study by Ascione and Arkow (1999), children and young people who experienced some kind of abuse in childhood or witnessed these types of violent conducts, either with animals or people, tend to repeat these attitudes in adulthood, giving continuity to the cycle of violence they had already been submitted to.

When crossing the variables age of the aggressor × origin of the animal, it was noticed that the aggressors aged <21 years preferred to abuse stray animals, whereas those aged >21 years preferred to abuse domiciled animals (Table 3).

It is possible that the relationship between the age of the aggressor and origin of the animal may be linked to the fact that young people preferred to abuse stray animals, unlike the adults who opted for domiciled animals. According to Arkow and Nassaro (2017), people who abuse animals in the family environment have the objective of maintaining control of the whole family, and one of the very

frequent ways of doing so is to mistreat pets, in other words those that are domiciled, as there is a close affective relationship between these animals and their loved ones. In fact, in this case, specifically, more studies are necessary to come to a deeper knowledge of the real reasons that led to this statistically significant relationship between the age of the aggressors and origin of the animals.

Table 3
Relationship between the variables age of the aggressor and origin of the abused animal according to what was reported in the questionnaire applied to the veterinary doctors who participated in the research between July and October 2019 in the state of Paraíba, Brazil

Aggressor age		Origin of animals					P value
		Domiciled	Stray	Community	Was not able	Total	
<21 years	N	5	25	1	3	34	<0.0001
	%	(14.7%)	(73.5%)	(2.9%)	(8.8%)	(100%)	
≥21 years	N	26	9	5	1	41	
	%	(63.4%)	(22%)	(12.2%)	(2.4%)	(100%)	

When asked if they usually accompany the modifications in the legislations related to their profession, 57.3% (43/75) of those interviewed answered yes, whereas 42.7% (32/75) answered that they did not. The veterinarians have the obligation to accompany the modifications related to their profession through its code of ethics, as it is from this code that the profession is guided. However, in this study, a significant portion of these professionals did not accompany the modifications in their profession's legislation. Furthermore, almost half of the interviewees (48% [36/75]) answered that they did not have the knowledge of the legislation regarding the practice of animal abuse. However, in Brazil, there is legislation about the practice of animal

abuse, and such conduct is considered crime (Lei nº 9.605, de 12 de fevereiro de 1998).

The veterinarians must be aware of the animal protection legislation, in addition to notifying cases of abuse that they had knowledge of (CFMV, 2016, 2018). When asked if they knew how to denounce animal abuse situations, 64% (48/75) of them said yes, whereas 36% (27/75) said no. However, in relation to the attitude of denouncing someone for the crime of animal abuse, great reluctance among these professionals was observed, as only 9.3% (7/75) claimed to have had denounced, whereas 90.7% (68/75) of the interviewees had not denounced (Figure 1).

When the data on the sex of the veterinarian × modifications in the legislation

were evaluated, it was observed that the veterinarians of the male sex were the ones who most accompany the changes in the legislations regarding their profession ($p < 0.05$). After the analysis of the veterinarians' answers to the questions regarding the knowledge of how to denounce \times has already denounced, it was noticed that majority

reported that they have the knowledge of how to denounce but preferred not to do so ($p < 0.05$). When comparing the answers to the variables knowledge of the animal abuse legislation \times has already denounced, the frequency of those who really know the legislation and have already denounced was of 15.4% (6/39).

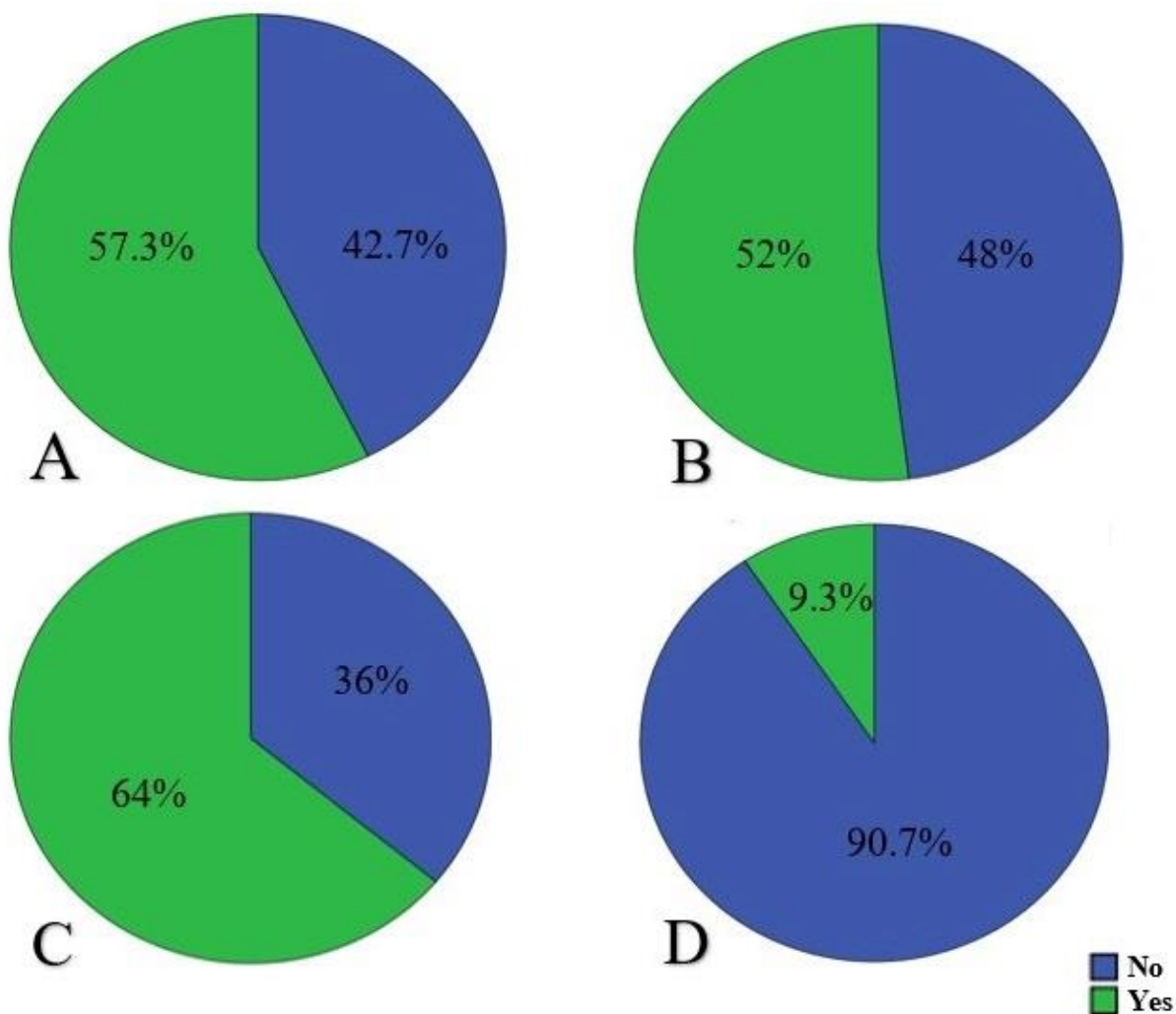


Figure 1. Representation of the answers provided by the veterinarians about the legislation and actions taken in relation to the animal abuse.

A) Do you usually accompany the modifications in the legislations concerning your profession as a veterinary doctor? B) Do you have the knowledge of the legislation that deals with animal abuse crimes? C) Do you know how to denounce animal abuse crimes? D) Have you already denounced anyone for animal abuse crimes?

In other studies conducted in Brazil, Colombia, Australia, and the United States, the main reason for not reporting suspect or confirmed cases of abuse or even reports with nub-notified numbers was the lack of knowledge to identify animal abuse (Green & Gullone, 2005; Kogan et al., 2017; Monsalve et al., 2019). However, when the veterinarians were asked about their greatest difficulties regarding denouncing the crime of animal abuse, 90.7% (68/75) said that they did not present the lack of technical knowledge to identify the abuse crimes, whereas only 9.3% (7/75) stated having technical difficulty in diagnosing abuse. When the data relating to the knowledge about how to denounce were analyzed, the majority (50.7% [38/75]) claimed that they did not know how to report, which is similar to the study of Monsalve et al. (2019) in which the veterinarians interviewed affirmed that they had difficulty in identifying and reporting the abuse situations.

Despite the veterinarians from the state of Paraíba stating that they had technical knowledge about the identification of abuse, the majority of them did not have the knowledge of how to report these cases, which is concerning. Besides not being able to combat these criminal practices, these may also be subject to administrative sanctions. They should maintain constant attention to the possibility of the occurrence of cruelty, abuse, and maltreatment to animals and register the confirmed and/or suspect cases in the patient records and send the document attesting the confirmation or suspicion of the unlawful conduct to the Council of Veterinary Medicine in which they are registered (CFMV, 2018).

In Brazil, the majority of the veterinary doctors did not receive enough information about how to proceed legally in cases of animal

cruelty, abuse, and maltreatment. Besides that there are no laws to protect them of civil and criminal responsibilities, resulting from their denunciation, cases of such practices are not actually confirmed (Monsalve et al., 2019). This is different from countries such as the United States, which has laws that grant legal immunity to the veterinarians if the abuses are not detected, provided that they had reported it in good faith, protecting them from possible lawsuits on the part of the animal aggressors (Kogan et al., 2017).

Other difficulties related to the denouncements of maltreatments were reported by the veterinarians who took part in the research, for example, the absence of action by the competent public bodies (81.3% [61/75]); absence of specific places for the denouncement (62.75% [47/75]); not very punitive laws, too mild (58.7% [44/75]); feeling of impunity (56% [42/75]); and fear of retaliation by the animal's aggressor (36% [27/75]).

In spite of the maltreatment practices being considered a crime in Brazil (Brasil, 1998), it is classified as being of a minor offensive potential (Rodrigues, 2010). This case presents minor penalties that do not discourage the practice of such crimes, therefore giving the impression of impunity, in addition to bringing the feeling of insecurity to those who have denounced, as generally those who harm animals may also commit crimes against human beings (Arkow & Nassaro, 2017). Therefore, the fear of retaliation by the author of the crime and the feeling of impunity are shared by the veterinarians (Donley, Patronek, & Luke, 1999). This is similar to other health professionals when reporting crimes against humans (Garbin, Dias, Rovida, & Garbin, 2015).

When questioned if, at any given moment of their career, these professionals had been requested to help in the investigation of animal abuse crimes by any judicial or law enforcement body, 10.7% (8/75) of them answered yes. However, regarding the elaboration of any expert reports or reports attesting to the crime of animal abuse, 20% (15/75) of the interviewees affirmed that they had already produced such documents. Kogan et al. (2017) showed that a frequency of 28.4% of veterinarians requested to take part in the investigation of animal abuse crimes and 71.7% felt slightly or minimally prepared for the production of such documents. Although no questions were asked regarding the level of preparation for the production of documents of the veterinarians of Paraíba, it can be inferred that these may be subjected to produce such documents, and it is up to them to have the necessary technical and legal knowledge for an adequate provision of services and production of trustworthy and valid documents with the objective of assisting in the elucidation of the incident.

Conclusions

Veterinarians will, at some point in their clinical routine, encounter situations of animal maltreatment and human violence. However, many of them still have doubts regarding how to act in these cases, mainly related to the legal aspects; therefore, a more efficient training during their professional development is necessary. Moreover, the bodies representing the profession, with the aim of encouraging them to carry out the denouncements, could offer legal support, promotion of courses, workshops, and lectures focused on legal veterinary medicine to ensure that these

professionals may, indeed, feel more confident and change their attitudes related to the denouncements, assisting even more in the maintenance of the animal and human welfare.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare they have no conflict of interests.

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