Veterinarians are often the first line of defense against animal abuse. They often serve as the first responders in recognizing and reporting animal cruelty. Veterinarians are not traditionally trained, however, to identify features that raise the index of suspicion of animal abuse or signs consistent with or highly suggestive of abuse. Additionally, veterinarians often fall into the trap of thinking that owners who care enough about their animals to provide veterinary care are unlikely to abuse their animals. This is simply not the case. The largest barrier to diagnosing abuse is the existence of emotional blocks in the minds of veterinary professionals. These can be so powerful that they prevent the diagnosis from even being considered in obvious cases. The most important step in diagnosing animal abuse is to force oneself to consider this as a differential diagnosis when there is suspicion of non-accidental injury.

Veterinary forensics is an emerging branch of veterinary medicine. It is essential for veterinarians to be involved in cases of animal abuse, as veterinarians are and should be the leaders for setting the highest standards for animal welfare in society. Veterinarians are the rational and natural advocates for animals. Not only does society demand the investigation of crimes against animals but crimes against animals affects more than just animals. There is a strong and established link between human violence and animal cruelty. Crimes against animals can be a warning sign of future violent acts and individuals who witness animal cruelty can become desensitized to violence. Animal abuse may also occur in conjunction with other crimes such as domestic violence and the illegal sales of drugs and guns. Having taken an oath, veterinarians have a duty not only to protect and serve animals but humans as well. Violence is a public health matter. By addressing animal abuse veterinarians have the potential to save human and animal life as well as reduce suffering.

Veterinarians play a critical role in animal abuse cases, encompassing an array of duties within the context of veterinary forensic sciences. Veterinary forensic science is the application of a broad spectrum of sciences, including veterinary medicine, to answer questions of interest to a court of law. The term “forensic medicine” is used to encompass all aspects of forensic work of a medical nature. In the past, this term was often used interchangeably with “forensic pathology.” Forensic pathology, however, refers to the branch of forensic medicine which deals with death investigations. Nowadays, the term “clinical forensic medicine” is applied to the branch of forensic medicine involving the living.

In some ways, the role of the forensic veterinarian can be compared to that of a human medical examiner. The duties of a forensic veterinarian, however, are often broader than that of a medical examiner. These duties can include the triage of live victims, examination, treatment, and
continuing care of live victims, necropsy of deceased victims, evidence identification and assessment, assessment of the scene and its effects on the victims, and expert witness testimony. Unlike human forensic cases, animal abuse investigations typically do not have access to supporting forensic specialists, such as a forensic veterinarian; therefore, vital evidence may go undetected, may not be collected, processed or analyzed, or may not withstand scrutiny in court.

A forensic medical examination is essential to the prosecution of a case of animal abuse. It often allows the forensic veterinarian to provide a detailed narrative of how an animal may have suffered or died. It provides a voice for the victim. Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of training among veterinary professionals and within the veterinary curriculum in recognizing, reporting, and documenting crimes against animals.