Introduction: It is the mission of the NC State Veterinary Health Complex (VHC) to provide the best medical care for animal patients and work to ensure their continued wellbeing. Veterinarians, students and support staff who, in the context of a veterinarian-client-patient relationship, suspect animal abuse and/or neglect should consult with their Section Chief or Service Head at the time the suspicion arises to determine whether such concerns should be communicated to the appropriate authorities.

Background: As a part of clinical practice, veterinarians, students and support staff may observe cases of animal abuse or neglect as defined by federal or state laws, or local ordinances. When these situations cannot be resolved through client education (particularly for neglect or passive abuse), the AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to appropriate authorities. Disclosure may be necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people. Veterinarians, students and support staff should be aware that accurate record keeping and documentation of these cases are invaluable.

Per NC General Statute 14-360 Cruelty to animals
a. If any person shall intentionally overdrive, overload, wound, injure, torment, kill, or deprive of necessary sustenance, or cause or procure to be overdriven, overloaded, wounded, injured, tormented, killed, or deprived of necessary sustenance, any animal, every such offender shall for every such offense be guilty of a Class I misdemeanor.

b. If any person shall maliciously torture, mutilate, maim, cruelly beat, disfigure, poison, or kill, or cause or procure to be tortured, mutilated, maimed, cruelly beaten, disfigured, poisoned, or killed, any animal, every such offender shall for every such offense be guilty of a Class I felony. However, nothing in this section shall be construed to increase the penalty for cockfighting provided for in G.S. 14–362.

c. As used in this section, the words "torture", "torment", and "cruelly" include or refer to any act, omission, or neglect causing or permitting unjustifiable pain, suffering, or death. As used in this section, the word "intentionally" refers to an act committed knowingly and without justifiable excuse, while the word "maliciously" means an act committed intentionally and with malice or bad motive. As used in this section, the term "animal" includes every living vertebrate in the classes Amphibia, Reptilia, Aves, and Mammalia except human beings. However, this section shall not apply to the following activities:

1. The lawful taking of animals under the jurisdiction and regulation of the Wildlife Resources Commission, except that this section shall apply to those birds exempted by the Wildlife Resources Commission from its definition of "wild birds" pursuant to G.S. 113–129(15a).

2. Lawful activities conducted for purposes of biomedical research or training or for purposes of production of livestock, poultry, or aquatic species.
2a. Lawful activities conducted for the primary purpose of providing food for human or animal consumption.

3. Activities conducted for lawful veterinary purposes.

4. The lawful destruction of any animal for the purposes of protecting the public, other animals, property, or the public health.

Per NC General Statute 14-360.1 **Immunity for veterinarian reporting animal cruelty** (Effective 10/01/07)

Any veterinarian licensed in this State who has reasonable cause to believe that an animal has been the subject of animal cruelty in violation of G.S. 14-360 and who makes a report of animal cruelty, or who participates in any investigation or testifies in any judicial proceeding that arises from a report of animal cruelty, shall be immune from civil liability, criminal liability, and liability from professional disciplinary action and shall not be in breach of any veterinarian–patient confidentiality, unless the veterinarian acted in bad faith or with a malicious purpose. It shall be a rebuttable presumption that the veterinarian acted in good faith. A failure by a veterinarian to make a report of animal cruelty shall not constitute grounds for disciplinary action under G.S. 90-187.8.

**HISTORY OR CLINICAL SIGNS SUGGESTIVE OF ABUSE AND/OR NEGLECT INCLUDE:**

- A history that is incongruous with the presenting complaint or clinical signs
- A direct confession or suspect signs of other forms of abuse in the home
- Medical treatments sought from a multiple, different veterinary practices
- Lameness or other injuries without histories supporting the severity of the clinical signs
- Injuries to pets where owners describe ongoing and upsetting toilet training "accidents"
- Multiple bite wounds in patients with numerous scars around the head, ears, and legs from previous injuries
- The presence of rubber bands around limbs tails, ears, and scrotums
- Severely matted animals where the animal's condition is not consistent with its disposition and/or temperament
- Severe malnutrition from under-feeding
- Chronic, infected, untreated wounds, often present in pets where grooming has been neglected (maggots may or may not be present) or excessive ectoparasitism (ticks, fleas)
- Chains and collars that have cut through the skin and into the musculature of the neck; often related to rapidly growing medium to large breed dogs with inadequate owner attention
- Acute and serious medical crises where the client refuses to authorize euthanasia or veterinary care
- Unexplained chemical or thermal skin burns
- Stupor from possible drug or alcohol ingestion
- Changed hair color due to bleaching by ammonia from urine

**CONFRONTING SUSPECTED ANIMAL ABUSE**

1. If you suspect an animal is being abused, notify and consult first with your Service Chief or Section Head.

2. Gather as much information as possible in a non-confrontational manner.
   - Try to clarify any vague, incongruous medical histories
   - How did this happen? When did this happen? Who was involved?
   - Does the history make sense? Do the injuries match the history?
   - Does the animal have behavioral problems? Bite history?

3. Decide whether to educate client or report incident.
- Look at the number of problems, severity and duration
- Review medical records of client’s other animals
- Review medical record of this patient for previous injuries
- Assess the attitude of the client-indifferent? Concerned?
- Implement procedures for follow up on questionable cases
- Often passive neglect is the result of lack of information or competency to care for the animal (i.e. owners that are elderly, invalid, or otherwise disabled)

REPORTING AND INVESTIGATING SUSPECTED ANIMAL ABUSE

1. Contact the appropriate authorities. Animal abuse is criminal offense.
   NCSU Campus Police: 919-513-3000
   City of Raleigh Animal Control Unit: 919-831-6311

2. Preserve and document the evidence.
   - Perform a complete physical examination (or necropsy)
   - If appropriate, procure samples (matted hair, dirt, debris, semen, etc.) and label appropriately (date, time, patient id, sample description)
   - Take photographs to document the condition of the animal from multiple vantage points with a ruler or object in the frame to indicated the size of the lesion(s); label photos thoroughly and clearly by placing a clearly marked card next to the animal with the patient’s ID and date (this will ensure that the information is imprinted on the film and not added after the fact and therefore suspect).
   - If appropriate to the care, perform CBC, chemistry panel, fecal, urinalysis, etc. Diagnostics should be performed as would be necessary to work up any case, and then expanded.
   - If musculoskeletal injury is noted/suspected, radiograph the affected area. Consider additional images of thorax, abdomen, and appendicular skeleton to document previous injury or healing fracture.
   - Please be aware that veterinarians are not permitted to hold animals or perform treatments without owner consent. Contact the appropriate authority for assistance and appropriate intervention.

3. Maintain the chain of custody of the evidence.
   - Notify laboratories and other consultants in writing that this is a forensics investigation
   - Know the location of the evidence at all times (including the patient, if possible)

4. Maintain thorough, legible medical records as legal documents. Document all findings clearly in the medical record, listing abuse or neglect as a differential.

Portions of text taken from:
The Veterinarian’s Role in Handling Animal Abuse - ASPCA / veterinaryforensics.com
Penn Policy Regarding Animal Abuse and Neglect - University of Pennsylvania, School of Veterinary Medicine
Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)
North Carolina General Statute: Article 14 – Cruelty to Animals:
http://www.nega.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/ByArticle/Chapter_14/Article_47.html

Additional resources:
http://www.pet-abuse.com/