IDENTIFYING INJURIES ASSOCIATED WITH ORGANIZED DOGFIGHTING

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Identifying Dogfighting Victims

- History of dogfighting
- Fighting dog characteristics
- Types of dogfighters, training & conditioning
- Forensic medical examination findings
- Common findings on examination
- Bait dogs
- Aggression & scarring in dogs involved in dogfighting
- Veterinarian’s role
- References
History of Dogfighting

- Pit bull fighting dates to England in the mid-1800’s
  - Bull-baiting
  - Outlawed in 1886 with the Humane Act
  - Replaced bull-baiting with dogfighting
  - Selective breeding for pit fighting dogs
    - Pit Bull Terrier

- US fighting dogs
  - American Pit Bull Terriers primarily, occasional crosses used in street fights
  - Traits that are attractive to dog fighters:
    - Strength relative to size
    - Bite style
    - Agile and athletic
    - Animal aggressive
    - Ignore signs of submission
    - No warning signs of attack
    - Gameness
Most desirable trait of a fighting dog: gameness
Fighting Dog Behaviors

- Not typically aggressive toward humans

- Attack targets that do not provoke the attack
  - Minimal provocation to attack
  - Do not respond to normal dog behavioral cues such as warning of an attack
  - Selectively bred to do so

- Ignore displays or signs of submission
  - Selectively bred to fight to exhaustion or death
Types of Dogfighters

- **Professionals**
  - Income from breeding, selling and fighting
  - Maintain a large “yard”
  - Well connected
  - Function on a national or international level

- **Hobbyists**
  - 1+ dogs participating in several organized fights annually
  - Small income
  - Entertainment

- **Street fighter**
  - Impromptu matches
  - No rules
  - Usually involved in other illicit activities
Training & Conditioning

- Professionals & hobbyists
- Start training around 1 year of age
  - Will “roll” or “bump” dogs
  - Short controlled fight to weed out dogs unsuitable for fighting
  - Unlikely to have the same injuries as fighting adults
- Game test at 2 years of age
  - Pitted against older, experienced, sometimes larger dog
  - Fight interrupted to see if the younger dog continues to “scratch”
  - Dog is fought or rolled until exhausted, then pitted against a fresh dog
    - Test of endurance
    - Dog not game is called a cur
- Unexperienced hobbyists, street fighters do not follow these steps
Training & Conditioning

- Conditioning is called the “keep”
- Diet and exercise program 4-6 weeks prior to a fight
- Often isolated from other dogs
- Notes taken during the keep
  - Calendar
  - Notebook
- Goal: get dog to conditioned weight
  - Lowest possible weight without loss of muscle
  - Also known as pit or match weight
  - Chain weight: unconditioned weight
Treadmill

Weigh scale

Syringes, needles

Dietary supplements

Jenny or cat-mill

Housed in kennels on cinder blocks

Jump pole
Fight Rules

- Several types of fight rules
- Dogs weighed and washed by opponent’s handlers under supervision
- Weight agreed on prior to fight
- Fights can last several hours
  - Ends with handler concession, dog quits or dies
  - Dogs that are not game are usually executed
Common Findings during Forensic Medical Examination

- Distribution of wounds and scars
  - Spontaneous fighting (non-fighting dogs)
    - Scruff, shoulders, hocks
    - Bites usually inhibited
    - Only a few bites produce full-thickness puncture wounds
    - Target ears, necks, front legs, hind legs to lesser extent
  - Organized dogfighting
    - Head, neck, legs, chest
    - Repeated targeting
    - Continue to attack a submitting opponent → ventral abdominal injuries
    - Bred, trained & conditioned to target specific areas
Study Objective

- Evaluate the types and prevalence of injuries found in a population of dogs involved in spontaneously occurring dogfights and compare these with those of dogs known to have been used in organized dogfighting.

- Establish evidence-based patterns of injury as a means to help clinicians identify signs of organized dogfighting and aid in the prosecution of this crime.
Criteria

- Dogs involved in spontaneous fights
  - Big dog little dog (BDLD)
  - Medium dog medium dog (MDMD) of same sex and weight
  - Pulled from medical records at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University between January 1, 2003 and June 1, 2014

- Dogs involved in organized dogfights
  - Case dogs seized in connection with dogfighting law enforcement raids
  - Examined between May 2, 2009 and March 26, 2013
  - Electronic medical records available
  - Excluded if < 2 years of age and without wounds, scars or scar chart
Procedures

- Medical records review
- Demographics
  - Breed, weight, age, sex, spay/neuter status
- Body surface
  - 51 sections grouped into 13 zones
Study Conclusions

- Organized fighting more commonly had injuries to a given area, as well as multiple injuries
  - Thoracic limbs (96.8%)
  - Dorsal and lateral aspects of the head (93.5%)
  - Muzzle or oral mucosa (88.7%)
  - Ventral neck and thoracic region (58.1%)

- BLDL location of injuries
  - Thoracic and abdominal (35% lateral, 20% dorsal, 16.9% ventral)
  - Dorsal and lateral aspect of the neck (26.3%)
  - Eye and periorbital region (15.6%)

- MDMD
  - Pinnae (44.4%)
  - Dorsal and lateral aspects of the neck (41.7%)
  - Thoracic limbs (41.7%)
  - Muzzle and oral mucosa (25%)
  - Dorsal and lateral aspects of the head (19.4%)
  - Pelvic limbs (16.7%)
Pattern of injuries in spontaneous fights with a larger dog.

Pattern of injuries from dogs seized by law enforcement from organized dogfighting groups.

Pattern of injuries on medium-sized dogs that spontaneously fought with dogs of similar size and sex.

Common Findings on Forensic Examination

- Upper and lower arcades may be identifiable if corresponding scars and wounds can be detected
- Wounds in varied stages of healing
- **Puncture** wounds typical
- Ring lesions: opponent pulls away resulting in lesions on convex surfaces → partial or full circumscribing injury potentially resulting in degloving
- Wounds may appear to have been attended to
  - Staples
  - Sutures
  - Glue
  - Unlikely to have been shaved
Common Findings

- Thickened lips due to scar tissue
- Trauma to buccal mucosa
- Portion of lip/lips absent
- Draining tracts
- Slab fractures of premolars
- Fractured canines or incisors
- Traumatically avulsed gingiva
- Fractures in various stages of healing
- Feet may be abraded due to conditioning
Common Findings Cont’d

- Alopecia ventral neck
- Cropped ears not as common as in the past
- If cropped may be extremely short
Existing Scars & Injuries Chart

Note: Mark recent wounds in RED, mark scars in BLUE.

Veterinarian: __________________________ Date: __________________________
Law Enforcement Agency: __________________________ Case #: __________________________
Dog ID #: __________________________ Distinguishing Marks/Comments: __________________________

ASPCApro.org
Scar Chart (aspcapro.org)

- Completed for every dog
  - Demonstrate pattern and distribution of scars and wounds
  - Differentiate wounds and scars by using a different color marker/pen
  - Estimate age of wounds
  - Note any evidence of medical care provided
  - Indicate whether medical care appears to have been provided by a veterinarian

- Aging wounds
  - Estimation
  - Granulation bed takes a minimum of 1 week to form
  - Granulation tissue grows 2-3 mm a week then slows to a minimum of 1 cm/month
  - Biopsy can assist in estimating age
  - However, many factors affect rate of wound healing: age, continued stress/injury, systemic disease, medication, health, nutrition, blood loss, oxygenation, maceration, desiccation, etc.
What about bait dogs?

- NOT COMMON

- Not bred, trained or conditioned to fight

- Scarring and puncture wounds over most of the animal’s body
  - Ventral caudal abdomen
  - Hind legs

- Teeth filed or removed
  - Can also be due to wear!!

- Can see blunted teeth or removed teeth in breeding females

- Can you use behavioral assessment to determine if a scarred dog may have been used in dogfighting?
Study Goals

- Describe
  - Extent and distribution of scarring among dogs seized from organized dogfighters
  - Extent of aggression towards other dogs from this population

- Analyze the relationship between scarring and aggression towards other dogs

- Investigate whether the sex of the dog affects this relationship

- Determine if the level of scarring can provide a useful screening test for aggression towards dogs
Materials and Methods

- 279 pit-bull type dogs seized as evidence in 4 organized dogfighting investigations
  - 2012-2015
  - Dogs originated from 13 different owners residing in 6 states in the SE and Midwest
  - 27 excluded from study

- Inclusion criteria
  - Complete forensic behavioral and medical data
  - Estimated by veterinary examination to be young adults (6 months-3 years) or adults (at least 3 years) based on dental examination
  - Excluded puppies < 6 months
    - Not used in organized dogfights
    - No scarring

- Behavioral data collected by teams of forensic animal behavior professionals (CPDT or CAAB certification)
  - ASPCA temporary shelters
  - 3 day acclimation period
  - Dogs cleared by veterinary staff
  - Model dog test & stimulus dog test
Figure 2. Percentage of dogs displaying dog aggression, by scar count and sex, with 95% confidence intervals.
Study Conclusions

- Significant but imperfect relationship between extent of scarring on front legs, dorsal and lateral head, and muzzle and oral mucosa with dog aggression exhibited in a standardized behavior evaluation.

- Dogs with 10+ scars in these zones more likely to display dog aggression than dogs with fewer or no scars.

- BUT, one-quarter of unscarred dogs were dog-aggressive and one-fifth of dogs with 40+ scars were not.

- Behavioral information should be collected in addition to scar count to have a more informed decision.

- These findings only apply to dogs with confirmed dogfighting origins.
Where do you, as a veterinarian, come in for suspected cases of dogfighting?
Types of Animal Cruelty

- Unintentional Cruelty/Neglect
  - By far the most common form of cruelty seen at Animal Services along with hoarding

- Hoarding

- Non-Accidental Injuries

- Puppy Mills

- *Dogfighting

- Sexual Abuse
Laws in Florida: Cruelty to Animals

- Florida Statute 828.12: Cruelty to Animals

  (1) A person who unnecessarily overloads, overdrives, torments, deprives of necessary sustenance or shelter, or unnecessarily mutilates, or kills any animal, or causes the same to be done, or carries in or upon any vehicle, or otherwise, any animal in a cruel or inhumane manner, commits animal cruelty, a misdemeanor of the first degree, punishable as provided in s. 775.082 or by a fine of not more than $5,000, or both.

  (2) A person who intentionally commits an act to any animal, or a person who owns or has the custody or control of any animal and fails to act, which results in the cruel death, or excessive or repeated infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering, or causes the same to be done, commits aggravated animal cruelty, a felony of the third degree, punishable as provided in s. 775.082 or by a fine of not more than $10,000, or both.
Laws in Florida: Fighting or baiting animals; offenses; penalties

- Florida Statute 828.122: Fighting or baiting animals; offenses; penalties
- “The Animal Fighting Act”

(3) Any person who knowingly commits any of the following acts commits a felony of the third degree, punishable as provided in s. 775.082, s. 775.083, or s. 775.084:

(a) Baiting, breeding, training, transporting, selling, owning, possessing, or using any wild or domestic animal for the purpose of animal fighting or baiting;

(b) Owning, possessing, or selling equipment for use in any activity described in paragraph (a);

(c) Owning, leasing, managing, operating, or having control of any property kept or used for any activity described in paragraph (a) or paragraph (b);

(d) Promoting, staging, advertising, or charging any admission fee to a fight or baiting between two or more animals;
Fighting or baiting animals; offenses; penalties continued

- (e) Performing any service or act to facilitate animal fighting or baiting, including, but not limited to, providing security, refereeing, or handling or transporting animals or being a stakeholder of any money wagered on animal fighting or baiting;

- (f) Removing or facilitating the removal of any animal impounded under this section from an agency where the animal is impounded or from a location designated by the court under subsection (4), subsection (5), or subsection (7), without the prior authorization of the court;

- (g) Betting or wagering any money or other valuable consideration on the fighting or baiting of animals; or

- (h) Attending the fighting or baiting of animals.

Notwithstanding any provision of this subsection to the contrary, possession of the animal alone does not constitute a violation of this section.
Legal Responsibility

- AVMA and AAHA recognize the importance of responding to suspicions of client involvement in animal cruelty.
- Reporting not mandatory in Florida
- Immunity for good faith reporting of suspected abuse
- Knowingly assisting clients suspected of dogfighting activity may result in criminal charges

Florida Statute 828.12, section 4

“A veterinarian licensed to practice in the state shall be held harmless from either criminal or civil liability for any decisions made or services rendered under the provisions of this section. Such a veterinarian is, therefore, under this subsection, immune from a lawsuit for his or her part in an investigation of cruelty to animals.”
Your Responsibility as a Veterinarian

- The most significant indicator that an animal’s condition may result from dogfighting is that its injuries are inconsistent with the account provided by the owner or the account changes during the course of examination.

- **Warning signs**
  - Multiple *puncture* wounds in various stages of healing on the face, chest, forelimbs
  - Wounds inconsistent with account given (i.e. wounds caused by tusks of a boar, unusual location of wounds, lacerations or slashing injuries)
  - Improper ear docking or tail cropping
  - Teeth filed down or extracted
  - Abrasions or embedded collar/chain marks on neck
  - Owners may request drugs or medical supplies for animals not seen by the clinic
  - Cash payment or third party payment
Assisting Law Enforcement if Requested

- Primary role: assist, assess and provide emergency treatment of animals rescued from the scene

- General physical examination including bloodwork and fecal
  - CBC (all ill and thin to emaciated)
  - Chemistry (all ill and thin to emaciated)
  - Urine or blood for anabolic steroid testing if suspected based on scene findings or use is suspected (dogs in a keep or recently fought)
  - Fecal float (all dogs)
  - Heartworm test (all dogs if old enough)
  - Babesia PCR (all dogs)

- Radiographs
  - Dogs with heavy scarring or suspected fractures (healing or healed)

- DNA
  - Buccal swabs for Canine CODIS (https://www.vgl.ucdavis.edu/forensics/CANINECODIS.php)
References


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