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Reported by - MICHAEL PECIC - 2009 Churchill Fellow

To study forensic investigation practices into animal cruelty

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Michael Pecic

18 August 2010
Introduction

It seems an eternity ago, but it only feels like yesterday I was working in the Queensland Police Service as a senior detective. For nearly 20 years I dedicated my policing career to investigating and enhancing investigative practices surrounding child abuse and sexual offences. Investigative practices were centred on the importance of gathering evidence from crime scenes, victims and suspects to ensure the most of advancements in forensic science could be utilised to help solve these hideous offences.

Nearly 4 years ago now I was discussing my future career with my wife when an opportunity presented itself for me to apply my set skills in investigating abuse against children to cruelty offences against animals. Having always been closely connected to my furry friends I knew that passion and drive would never be an issue. So, with an open mind and excitement I commenced my new role as the Chief Inspector for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in Queensland.

I soon found that investigative practices used to fight cruelty against animals was somewhat based on old style policing methods of good interviewing skills and reliance on informants and witnesses. Inquiries with government and interstate counterparts in animal welfare clearly indentified a real lack of expertise in crime scene investigation, evidence gathering and resources to have the most obtained from expert witnesses in both forensic veterinary and science fields when investigating animal cruelty offences.

So I embarked on a study of international animal welfare bodies investigating animal cruelty. It was soon apparent that there was clearly some real advancement in animal welfare legislation and investigation practices in some countries which had allowed for forensic investigation of animal victims and crime scenes to become an integral part of investigation practices. This lead to increased penalties and sentences of abusers and a greater understanding of the pain and suffering animals experience during these incidents.
I had a vision to establish a forensic investigation unit capable of not only responding to animal cruelty incidents in Queensland but across Australia. The United States was a clear leader in the establishment of such units and just as importantly gained the excitement and interest of the professional world of forensic medicine to help advance these techniques in animal cruelty cases.

Working for a charity organisation presents many challenges, no more then the acute use of funds to ensure every dollar is maximised in operational responses to the care of the some 40,000 animals that come into the care of RSCPA Queensland. So with the support of my CEO I made application for a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for a Churchill fellowship. I was very honoured when I received the notification of my success in being awarded this fellowship. It is with much gratitude and with the thanks of many animal victims of animal cruelty that I thank the Winston Churchill Trust for this life changing opportunity.

I would like to at this time thank the people who assisted me in planning and preparing for my trip. I will always be indebted to the countless emails, research and inquiries made by so many busy people to ensure I maximised my learning experience. I would especially like to thank the RSPCA organisation for their support during this entire process.

Last but not least to my family, no one made more sacrifices and provided more support and encouragement to me during this opportunity. For this I will be for ever be providing love, gifts and holidays to show my thanks!!!! .
Executive Summary
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Objective of fellowship
To Study forensic investigation practices in animal cruelty incidents.

Key Highlights
- Meeting inspirational leaders in the field of animal cruelty investigations.
- Meeting professionals in forensic science fields who are assisting investigators in developing forensic investigative practices.
- Viewing some of the state of the art mobile forensic units in the world.
- Interviewing Dr Melinda Merk, world recognised leader in crime scene investigation into animal cruelty incidents.

Recommendations
As a result of my findings, I make the following recommendations to the following key departments and organisations
- RSPCA Qld establish a forensic investigation unit;
- A RSPCA Investigator undertake crime scene analysis training;
- The Queensland Government actively support this program;
- To engage the support of the corporate sector in the sponsorship of this unit;
- Forensic veterinary and science fraternity embrace the development of this program;
- Legal prosecutorial bodies provide input into procedures and policies to be used in this field;
- Increased recognition by the court system of the pain and suffering of animals through informed decision making processes.
- This program is recognised and utilised across Australia.

Conclusion
My research in the United States definitely showed that like in Australia some states were far more advanced in investigative practices then others. Two important points enhance the ability for investigators in the United States (US) to provide the court good forensic supporting evidence in animal cruelty matters than those in Australia. Firstly, in most US states offences against animals are crimes which often carry mandatory custodial sentences. Whereas in Australia most animal cruelty offences are simple offences and very seldom carries more then a fine handed down by the courts even for the most serious and violent attacks.

The second point and the one that became very apparent during my entire journey was the amount of recourses available to investigators. Numerous universities, government and private practices quite often are just waiting for the opportunity to
provide expert examination and evidence. In Australia in nearly almost every state the waiting time for forensic examination for samples in complaints involving human victims is such that very little time or emphasis is placed on requests for similar examinations in animal cruelty investigations.

Finally the American Society for the Prevention to Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) have a very professional and state of the art mobile forensic unit which travels all through America providing expert investigative support during animal cruelty offences. This unit, if emulated in Australia will ensure that those advocating animal welfare can be the voice of the voiceless when solving animal cruelty offences.

**Implementation and Dissemination**

It is recommended that the information contained in this report be disseminated throughout Australia, in a number of ways:

- Presentation to all State and Federal animal welfare bodies;
- Report forwarded to the State Minister responsible for animal welfare;
- Submission of paper to Voiceless;
- Submission of paper to key Animal Welfare Groups;
- Submission of paper to colleagues involved in animal welfare;
- Presentation to the International Forensic Veterinary Science Association;
- Submission of paper to the Australian Veterinary Association.
Program

Disaster strikes
Many of my planned activities were turned upside down on my arrival into the United States. The large oil spill disaster in the South East corner of the country saw many animal welfare organisations provide large scale animal welfare response into the area. This meant that many of the veterinarians and investigators I was to interview were involved in the rapid response to injured wildlife. I managed to change my travel plans so I could explore and visit alternate investigative departments and forensic veterinary science programs.

But, just as I thought I had all of this settled, Nashville is declared a state of emergency after flash flooding. So, I once again had to change travel plans which affected some experts’ availability.

However I am happy to say the revised program still provided me a great insight into new advancements in forensic investigative practices and how to maximise resources in this field.

Final Program
April 23 – 30
Los Angeles, California, United States of America
Visited
Los Angeles Society for the Prevention to Cruelty to Animals (LASPCA)
- Bradley Keenan
Los Angeles Animal Services Commission
- Kaithleen Reordan

April 30 – May 6
Las Vegas, Nevada, United States of America
Visited
- Jeremy Flower
Las Vegas Humane Valley Society
- Louise Caneston
City of Las Vegas Animal Control
- Nina Rannels
Nevada Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

May 6-29
Orlando, Florida, United States of America
Visited
University of Florida
- Dr Melinda Merk
- Dr Jason Bird
Florida Wildlife and Nature Reserve Department
- Ranger Roger Fields

May 29 – June 7
New York, New York, United States of America
Visited
American Society for the Prevention to Cruelty to Animals
- Graham Rodriguez

June 7 – 10
San Francisco, California, United States of America
Visited
San Francisco SPCA
- Dr Jennifer Scarlett
San Francisco Commission of Animal Control and Welfare
- Bob Palalio
Secrets lie in the bones — and in the tissue and in the shape of the wounds, and the severity and type of injuries.

The vision of this paper is to examine the possibility of having a new outlook when investigating cruelty to animals by having investigators pouring over X-rays, bone fragments, bullet trajectories or other details, to establish whether a crime was committed against an animal. To have investigators know that experts wait to assist with chemistry, criminalist traits, genetics, morphology, pathology and digital evidence in solving animal cruelty will be a huge advancement in animal welfare.

In the United States of America forensic crime-scene investigations are no longer limited to human victims. Many of the very same techniques brought to public awareness by the popular CSI television series are being used to make cases against those who have harmed or killed cats, dogs, horses or other animals.

Applying forensic science to animal victims is a specialty still so new that it's fairly rare. But self-taught experts who have a background in veterinary or science are sharing their knowledge almost as quickly as they develop it. Many of these forensic teams now conduct crime scene investigations, determining cause of death and if a crime has occurred, they examine physical evidence in an attempt to link the victim and crime scene with a suspect. Laboratory specialists can also provide expert testimony in court.

I had the opportunity to observe study and interpret many of these ground breaking examination techniques. It was also great to see these very techniques being used to study and understand more about wildlife and behavioural traits in animals. A better understanding will help us give animals a voice when trying to show pain and suffering.
Los Angeles

Los Angeles being one of the largest cities in the United States was a great place to start to understand the processes and resources available in forensic investigations. To know how to gather forensic evidence through investigation techniques it is important to understand the definitions defined in the US surrounding animal cruelty and the charter many of the animal welfare groups have in responding to these complaints.

The Los Angeles SPCA advocate that animal cruelty encompasses behaviour harmful to animals ranging from neglect to malicious killing. Most cruelty investigated by Humane Officers can be resolved through education, if it is unintentional neglect. Intentional cruelty, or abuse, is knowingly depriving an animal of food, water, shelter or veterinary care or maliciously torturing, maiming, mutilating, or killing an animal. Both types of allegations can be felonies or misdemeanours.

I had the opportunity to spend several days with the investigators at the LA SPCA. I was surprised to find that only 3 operational officers were attached to the SPCA. The equipment they carried to investigate cruelty offences was minimal. Like many investigators in Australia they relied upon photographs to capture the majority of physical evidence for prosecutions.
I was, however, very impressed with the cross agency support and working agreements in place in responding to varying levels of activity or cruelty. The ability to engage local, state and federal departments into assisting in cruelty investigations seemed to present very few barriers. This allowed each department to bring specific skills allowing the charity organisations to rely more heavily on government agencies providing the technical and forensic support required during animal cruelty investigations.

The Animal Cruelty Task Force (ACTF) of the City of Los Angeles was a City of Los Angeles Animal Services Commission initiative, established to provide a dedicated response to animal cruelty offences. The ACTF consists of Animal Control Officers, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers, and the City Attorney’s Office. Based on complaints from the public as well as other sources, the ACTF primarily investigates the more serious animal cruelty violations in the City of Los Angeles, such as beatings and poisonings, dog fighting, cockfighting, and other animal abuse violations. The ACTF processes cases beginning with the preliminary reporting phase all the way through to case filing, presentation, and prosecution.

This is an extremely good program, because of the involvement of two detectives from the LAPD which allows the full forensic crime scene capabilities of the police service to be utilised in animal cruelty investigations. The task force adopted the same procedures as those of the LAPD when considering crime scene preservation and evidence collections. I was able to obtain valuable information on procedures and protocols surrounding forensic evidence gathering in animal cruelty investigations.

**Las Vegas**

When one thinks of Las Vegas one thinks about the party capital of the world, the bright lights and gambling. However, the city also faces one of the biggest challenges most animal welfare organisations and investigators face regularly. Abandonment of animals in a very transient city like Las Vegas presents unique obstacles for animal control and welfare groups. It is wonderful to see the SPCA and Humane Society in Nevada operating no-kill shelters, meaning a huge effort is made in addressing behavioural issues and re-homing these abandoned animals.
I went to Las Vegas hoping to understand a little bit more on how forensic investigation techniques could assist investigators in identifying owners who had abandoned their pets. The obvious use of micro-chipping data basis is an integral part of this forensic capability. Micro-chipping can be best explained as the insertion of a chip under the skin of an animal’s coat. This chip carries a unique number which can be scanned and linked back to the animal’s owner details. This entire process of animal identification highlights the importance in Australia of mandatory micro chipping of all dogs and cats.

The Animal Control Department of the city of Las Vegas also use other internet forensic search engines to identify current addresses of owners. They also have a memorandum of understanding with many motels within the City to search guest lists to locate owners staying in the city. Whilst these are basic tools they highlighted the effective use of forensic investigative tools such as the internet search engines and micro chipping.

**Orlando**

Orlando provided the highlight of my fellowship in terms of gathering a wide understanding of forensic veterinary science. I visited many interesting institutions and wildlife conservation areas which provided me with an insight into forensic capabilities and new research.

About two hours drive from Orlando is where I started my research into forensic medicine techniques used in animal welfare. In Gainesville, you will find the University of Florida where the William R. Maples Center for Forensic Medicine has teamed up with American Society for the Prevention to Cruelty to Animals to tackle the shortage of trained crime scene investigators to help prosecute those responsible for crimes against animals. The program is designed to teach investigators to be the voice of the victim by using evidence based investigative tools associated with forensic medicine.
Some of these set understandings and skills learnt in this program include:

- **Blood Evidence Supplies**: Tools to aid in the collection of blood evidence, including Phenolphthalein, Blue Star imaging equipment and blood spatter photo scales.
- **Blue Star**: A chemical compound that fluoresces hidden blood with a blue colour.
- **BlueMaxx**: An alternative light source used to detect fibres, hair and fluids, which can be used as evidence.
- **Chain of Custody**: The chronological documentation and/or paper trail showing the seizure, custody, control, transfer, analysis and disposition of evidence.
- **Crime Scene**: The specific location where a crime took place.
- **DNA Testing**: A technique to assist in the identification of individuals and animals on the basis of their respective DNA profiles.
- **Evidence**: The documentary or oral statements and the material objects collected at a crime scene.
- **Evidence Collection Supplies**: Tools that aid in the identification and collection of evidence, such as packaging and identification kits, entomology collection supplies and a Tiger UV light.
- **Forensic Botany**: The science of using plant-related materials to help solve crimes.
- **Forensic Entomology**: The science of using insect evidence to help solve crimes.
- **General Forensics Supplies**: Basic supplies needed to run a crime scene, such as a Digital SLR camera, crime scene tape, a stretcher for animal transportation and face masks.
- **Grave Detection and Exhumation Equipment**: Tools to aid in the detection and unearthing of grave sites, including soil sampler, sifter, GPS unit, compass and digital distance measuring devices.
- **Intentional Cruelty**: Occurs when an individual purposely inflicts physical harm or injury on an animal; usually an indicator of a serious human behaviour problem.
- Medical Examination and Surgical Equipment: Tools used to evaluate and treat animals for emergency life-threatening conditions, as well as necropsy equipment, including digital microscope, digital x-ray machine and anaesthesia/oxygen machine.
- Necropsy: The examination and dissection of a deceased, non-human body to determine the cause of death or changes produced by disease.
- Neglect: The failure to provide an animal with the most basic requirements of food, water, shelter and veterinary care.
- Phenolphthalein: A chemical compound that causes blood to turn bright pink in colour.
- Trace Evidence: Evidence normally occurring when objects or substances contact one another and leave a minute sample on the contact surfaces.
- Entomological (insect) evidence.
- Trajectory evidence

I had the opportunity to interview Dr Melinda Merck, who is viewed as one of the leaders in the advancement of forensic veterinarian science when investigating animal cruelty. She expressed, “the program will offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses and continuing education for veterinarians, law enforcement, animal control officers and others involved in the investigation and prosecution of crimes against animals. Our biggest mandate is to educate others. Veterinary students are craving this information and it will effect change."

Dr Merck during our interview stated, “Possible courses will include forensic entomology — the study of insects in decaying bodies — remain excavation, blood spatter pattern analysis, bite-mark analysis and animal crime scene processing. The training will be done in classroom settings, online and through workshops so students can learn the nuances of animal investigation. For example, blood spatter evidence is different from human evidence. Animals bleed differently than humans, usually much less, and the animal's behaviour certainly impacts how the blood stain patterns are analysed.”
The entire visit to the state of the art facility was very exciting and I am sure I will be one of the first enrolling in this exciting series of courses!

The International Forensic Veterinary Science Association (IFVSA) was established several years ago to provide veterinarians, investigators and scientists involved in animal cruelty an international body of experts and peers to share and discuss cases, advancements in technology and ideas. The association has a face book and twitter site to assist in easy communication between members and associates. The 3rd annual IFVSA conference was held in Orlando from May 12-14.

I had the pleasure of attending this conference as an associate member. I spoke to one of the founders of this association Jason H. Byrd, a professor and forensic entomologist from the University of Florida. He said, "The whole idea of these type of conferences was for experts in the field of animal cruelty to discuss and identify ways of putting the little pieces of the puzzle together to paint an overall picture for the judge and jury. Not one thing is the linchpin that gets the case — like you see on TV — but the overwhelming amount of evidence that can be built up and in most cases, end up with a confession."

At the conference there were many case studies looking at puppy farms and dog fighting rings in the United States. I was again very impressed with the collaboration between organisations during these matters. Australia has a lot to learn when it comes to this level of team work.

A presentation on pre autopsy computed tomography (CT) provided evidence on the good practice of conducting CT scans prior to autopsies, especially in cases where trauma has occurred or where preliminary answers are required for initial investigation inquiries or in public interest.

At the conference the ASPCA unveiled its newest mobile Animal Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) response vehicle, a 2010 Subaru Outback generously donated by Subaru of America, Inc. The Outback is customised specifically for the ASPCA Veterinary Forensics team, and will help support and expand the work we are able to do with the ASPCA Mobile Animal CSI Unit, a state-of-the-art laboratory on wheels.
The new CSI response vehicle will be used for field work to transport animal victims, store evidence from crime scene investigations and provide access to areas that are typically off-limits due to challenging terrain. It is outfitted with many unique features, including a slide-out cargo floor, evidence refrigerator, laptop computer station and exterior power outlets.

After spending valuable time at the university and attending the conference I used the remaining time in Orlando to understand the processes used by wildlife rangers and what resources were available to them in their field when investigating the abuse against wildlife. I spent some time with rangers at the Cape Canaveral reserve and spoke to scientists at Sea World and Walt Disney wildlife park. It was interesting to see the amount of time and effort Walt Disney are placing on better understanding the make up of wildlife through forensic science.

Wildlife rangers right across America have the only laboratory of its kind in the world, located in Ashland, Oregon where currently, a team of 33 people handle roughly 900 cases every year involving suspicion of animal cruelty.

The laboratory's mission is to help Federal and State law enforcement officers and inspectors in all 50 states, as well as 173 countries. The forensics team conducts crime scene investigations, determines cause of death and if a crime occurred, and examines
physical evidence in an attempt to link victim and crime scene with suspect. Laboratory specialists can also provide expert testimony in court.

New York

New York provided me the opportunity to spend some time with the investigative arm of the ASPCA. In particular I wanted to see how jobs are assigned to investigators and then how the crime scene investigation unit (CSI Unit) is utilised on a job.

The mobile animal CSI unit can allow the processing of suspected crime scenes more quickly and more efficiently. The vehicle allows for a chain of continuity surrounding evidence and preliminary examination on site. The vehicle is fully fitted out to examine and care for animals found at suspected crime scenes, and includes a triage area.

On board, the vehicle carries general supplies including cameras, crime scene tapes, stretchers, animal cages and personal protection material. Medical examination and surgical equipment is carried to evaluate and treat animals for emergency conditions, as well as necropsy equipment, including digital microscope, digital x-ray machine, sexual assault kit and anesthesia/oxygen machine. Blood evidence supplies such as phenolphthalein, Blue Star imaging equipment and blood spatter photo scales can be found along with evidence collection supplies such as packaging and identification kits, entomology collection supplies and tiger UV light source to detect trace evidence.

I was able to obtain copies of the procedural guidelines and policies surrounding the use of this vehicle. This I intend to implement into Australian practices to meet legislative guidelines.
American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals home office.

This is the state of the art Animal Crime Scene Investigation mobile laboratory.
San Francisco

San Francisco SCPCA has a state of the art veterinary hospital. The Leane B Roberts Animal Care Centre provides the very best in equipment for veterinarians to provide emergency treatment to abused animals. Dr Jennifer Scarlett heads up this department and has no doubt the new facility allows her team to provide the very best examination and expert procedures to assist investigators in their work.

Bib Palacio of the San Francisco Commission of Animal Control and Welfare stated the new SPCA facility has provided investigators of animal cruelty offences a great resource in providing medical evidence surrounding injuries suffered during cruelty offences or neglect cases.

This facility one day can hopefully be emulated in Australia to provide the medical support for animal welfare as in San Francisco.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this fellowship was to study the forensic investigative practices in animal cruelty matters in the United States. It is quite apparent that this field is a newly emerging field not only in the United States but all around the world. Investigators,
veterinarians and scientists are translating knowledge from forensic science to a new field devoted to solving crimes against animals.

The fellowship allowed me to compile an exhaustive library of texts, electronic copies of procedures and policies and a knowledge that can only be gained by being involved in the process, to confidently develop a crime scene unit in Australia for the benefit of animal welfare.

The biggest challenge facing animal welfare bodies in Australia is to gain the government support. The comparison of importance placed on animal welfare and the severity of animal cruelty offences in Australia to that of the United States is vastly different. Animal cruelty offences in America are seen as offences that usual carry jail term and are indictable offences. In Australia, in most circumstances animal cruelty offences are simple offences with only small fines being handed down by Magistrate courts.

Whilst it must be acknowledged that stronger animal cruelty laws and heightened public awareness of animal cruelty in some states in Australia have spurred greater interest in punishing offenders, financial and resourcing to support this advancement has been limited.

By developing and implementing the first CSI unit for animal cruelty offences I hope to give assistance and guidance to the whole range of responders to animal cruelty, from the public who report it, to the authorities who investigate it, to the prosecutors who prosecute it, to the veterinarians who want to be good witnesses, to judges who take this seriously.

In closing, animal cruelty is one of the more destructive ills in society, often linked with sociopathic behaviour, cruel and abusive behaviour toward animals reflects a severe lack of moral responsibility and social conscience. It can be inflicted in a wide variety of ways and can be rooted in a variety of causes. In turn, this disturbing and malicious behaviour gravely infects and poisons our social fabric. Research has shown that people who behave cruelly toward animals are more likely to behave
similarly toward humans. It is imperative that investigators deliver to the court, cases which provide in depth evidence in the pain and suffering of the animal involved. Hopefully in turn the judicial system and government can educate the community on the severity of these offences.

**Recommendations**

After undertaking this fellowship I make the following recommendations.

- RSPCA Qld establish a forensic investigation unit;
- A RSPCA Investigator undertake crime scene analysis training;
- The Queensland Government actively support this program;
- To engage the support of the corporate sector in the sponsorship of this unit;
- Forensic veterinary and science fraternity embrace the development of this program;
- Legal prosecutorial bodies provide input into procedures and policies to be used in this field;
- Increased recognition by the court system of the pain and suffering of animals through informed decision making processes.
- This program is recognised and utilised across Australia.