



Case Report

Animal serial killing: The first criminal conviction for animal cruelty in Brazil



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ABSTRACT

Animal cruelty is a known behavior of psychopaths, and although the serial killing of humans is widely acknowledged worldwide, this type of crime against animals is seldom discussed. This report describes the necropsy and toxicological findings of 37 dogs and cats, which were found dead in plastic bags in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The animals had all been in the care of an alleged animal rescuer and were to be referred for adoption before being found dead. In the necropsy, the animals showed varying degrees of putrefaction, indicating different periods of death, as well as single or multiple perforations on the thorax. The perforations reached the heart, lungs or large thoracic vessels, culminating in hemopericardium and hemothorax that led to death by circulatory failure and cardiac tamponade. Blood from the heart and thoracic cavity was analyzed by gas chromatography coupled with mass spectrometry (GC–MS) and tested positive for ketamine, a dissociative anesthetic. The suspect declared that she had killed only five of the animals and that they had all been fatally sick. The necropsy proved that all 37 animals were killed in the same way, that none of the animals had any terminal diseases and that a restricted drug was used. The suspect was sentenced to 12 years, 6 months and 14 days of prison for the killing of the 37 animals. This was the first conviction for the crime of animal cruelty in Brazil. The combined role of police, forensic veterinary pathologists and prosecutors were essential to the conviction, which was a great historical occasion in the fight against animal cruelty.

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1. Introduction

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of the United States of America, a serial killing is “the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events” [1]. There are several studies regarding cruelty against animals as a component of the behavioral history of serial killers or other psychopaths, in which the culprit often starts his cruel activities against animals in childhood or as a teenager [2–7]. Although serial killings of humans are largely acknowledged worldwide, this type of crime against animals is seldom discussed.

The field of forensic veterinary medicine is growing, reflecting the increasing public concern for animal welfare [8–13]. The role of the forensic veterinary pathologist is similar to its medical counterpart, with the basic difference of working with several species rather than one [9]. When an animal dies and cruelty or abuse is suspected, necropsy is highly recommended, as is photographic documentation of all gross findings that may be used as evidence in a forensic case [11,14]. The role of the forensic veterinary pathologist is especially difficult in cases of multiple animal deaths, where maintaining the proper identification of each animal must be a priority, along with preservation of the chain of custody [11,15,16].

In Brazil, animal abuse or ill-treatment are classified as crimes against the environment, according to the Federal Law number 9605 of February 12, 1998, in its article number 32, which identifies as a crime the practices of abuse, ill-treatment, injury or mutilation of wild and domestic animals. The penalty for such crimes foresees imprisonment for three months to a year and fines; if the animal

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dies as a result of such practices, the penalty is increased by one sixth to one-third.

In the present report, in a single night on January 2012, 37 animals, including dogs and cats, were found dead inside several trash bags on a public street in Sao Paulo, Brazil. According to the private detective hired by an animal protection non-governmental organization, the animals had been placed on the street the night before by a woman who claimed to be an animal rescuer. This woman was well known among non-governmental animal protection organizations: she had received thousands of stray dogs and cats for over ten years, supposedly taking care of them until they found a new home. However, for the twenty days a private detective watched her residence, more than two hundred animals entered, but none exited the house. The private detective found the corpses of 37 of these animals when he checked the numerous trash bags the woman put outside every night.

Among the dead dogs was a mixed breed adult female dog that had been photographed by the detective the day before, when she was delivered to the woman's house wearing a pink bow around her neck. This dog was found in a trash bag the next day with three other dogs and thirty-three cats in varying degrees of putrefaction.

The police raided the woman's house and found living animals inside, apparently in good health; the animals they were taken into custody by an animal protection organization. Several boxes of prescription medicines, such as ketamine and xylazine, as well as used syringes and needles, were found inside the residence. The case gained wide coverage from the media and incited popular protests in front of the suspect's house [17].

A police report was completed and the animals were sent to an animal diagnostic center (LAB&VET) and the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil for the determination of the cause of death; popular suspicions around the animals' death ranged from black magic rituals to an illegal market in animal blood for transfusions [17].

This report describes the necropsy and toxicological findings for these animals to draw attention to the role of the veterinarian in cases of multiple animal deaths and the importance of necropsy

and forensic pathology in legal or high profile cases broadly covered by the media.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Animals

Thirty-seven animals were referred for necropsy at the Animal Pathology Service of University of Sao Paulo, including 33 cats and 4 dogs, all of mixed breed. There were 3 puppies, 27 kittens, 1 adult dog and 6 adult cats. They were photographed inside the trash bags and over the necropsy table for preservation of the chain of custody and were identified with an individual tag number on their right hind legs, as shown in Fig. 1.

The corpses were subjected to full body radiography prior to the necropsy.

All of the animals were subject to identification photography, and the gross exam was performed following established necropsy techniques for small animals. All of the gross findings, including post mortem alterations, were photographed for the record.

Histopathology was performed on lung tissue, in order to evaluate pulmonary hemorrhage. The samples were previously sectioned, fixed in 10% buffered formalin and embedded in paraffin. Sections 5 μm in size were stained with hematoxylin and eosin and evaluated on an optical microscope (Nikon®). The histopathological analysis of other tissues was impaired by varying degrees of decomposition.

The 37 animals were scanned with a petSCAN® RT100 (Real Trace, Villebon-sur-Yvette, France) portable scanner to detect possible subcutaneous microchips.

2.2. Blood analysis by gas chromatography coupled with mass spectrometry (GC-MS)

Blood from the heart and thoracic cavity was submitted to toxicological screening utilizing GC-MS. Ketamine and xylazine



Fig. 1. The 33 cats and 4 dogs found dead in trash bags. Prior to the necropsy, all of the animals received an individual number attached to the right hind leg to maintain individual identification throughout the post-mortem exams.

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