



Health Risks of Zoophilia/Bestiality

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Editorial

Canada's Supreme Court ruling of June 9, 2016 stirred up a debate and an interest among professionals and laypersons about the legal, psychological, social, and health implications of zoophilia, legally known as bestiality. Due to a loophole in the Canadian law or a very narrow definition of bestiality, the recent ruling lead to an interpretation that most sex acts between people and animals are legal, as long as no human to animal or animal to human penetration is involved. The Supreme Court upheld the acquittal of a British Columbia man from bestiality charges who was also charged with 13 other counts of sexual assault after making the family dog lick off the peanut butter smeared on the genitals of his step daughters. Animal rights groups are in uproar over this ruling for several reasons including the animal abuse due to the inability of animals to consent and the link between animal sex abuse and child sex abuse. The executive director of the Animal Justice group, Camille Labchuk said, "People who sexually abuse animals are sometimes linked to sexually abusing children as well, as the accused did in this case," [1]. The only dissenting judge in the above case, Justice Rosalie Abella (in the 7-1 ruling) said, "Acts with animals that have a sexual purpose are inherently exploitative whether or not penetration occurs" [2]. Sexual contact with animals (SCA) is also a major health risk which has not been discussed by the media, animal rights advocates, and lawmakers. The purpose of this commentary is to highlight the major health risks of SCA and raise awareness of health professionals about this issue. Most health professionals are unaware of the risks and burden of zoophilia because it is underreported in the medical literature [3].

Zoophilia is considered a taboo subject in the modern society, yet the reported prevalence rates range from 8.3% to 4.9% for men and 3.6% to 1.9% for women in normal population [4-6]. However, in psychiatric inpatients the prevalence rate of zoophilia is very high (55%) which led to the suggestion that the questions about SCA should be included in the psychiatric clinical interviews [7]. The prevalence of zoophilia in the different parts of the world is not known because of the legal implications and taboo nature of the subject [8]. SCA in 31 United States and many other countries is considered animal abuse and a crime against nature [9,10]. A critical review of the conflicting opinions on zoophilia, its etiology and a comprehensive treatment plan along with some pertinent questions for future research are presented in a recent article by the present author [11].

Zoonotic diseases or zoonoses are the diseases of animals that can be transmitted from animals to humans. Although over 200 zoonoses have been identified which can be caused by bacteria, parasites, fungi, and viruses, 39 of them are listed alphabetically and described at the Washington State Department of Health website [12]. Of those zoonoses that can be transmitted by SCA to humans, three most dangerous ones are presented below [13].

Leptospirosis: Any contact with the sexual organs of dogs, cattle, pigs, horses and sheep can transmit this bacterial disease to humans. Leptospirosis can cause Meningitis which leads to death in about 10% of the cases.

Echinococcosis: Parasitic worms from the feces of dogs, cats, and sheep can cause this disease. The worms cause cysts in lungs, liver, brain, spleen, heart, and kidneys. If not treated, this disease can be fatal.

Rabies: One of the most severe of zoonoses, rabies is transmitted from the saliva of cats, dogs and horses. This is a viral infection which affects the central nervous system and is almost always fatal if not treated soon after the exposure.

SCA is also a risk factor for urological diseases among humans. In a study of 118 penile cancer patients, 44.9% patients had reported SCA leading to a conclusion that sex with animals is a risk factor for penile cancer and may be associated with venereal diseases [3]. The authors of this study suggested health campaigns to promote the refutation of sex with animals and condom use or other protective methods to minimize the risks. Due to the high prevalence and associated risks for penile cancer and possibly sexually transmitted diseases, the researchers felt that issue of SCA merits serious scientific attention. Lastly, they suggested that initiatives to eradicate sex with animals should be considered. I agree with their concerns and suggestions for prevention of many possible diseases one can acquire due to SCA.

In addition to the diseases one can catch through SCA, there is also the risk of injury that can be caused by large animals such as horses during the sexual intercourse. In 2005, a highly publicized case known as the "Enumclaw Horse Sex Case" became the landmark case to change the bestiality laws of the state of Washington where bestiality was legal since 1976. A 45 years old aerospace engineer for Boeing died after receiving anal sex from a stallion which was videotaped by his friend. The story was reported in The Seattle Times [14]. The large penis of the horse perforated his colon which led to his death. On February 11, 2006, due to the vast publicity of this case, the state of Washington outlawed bestiality and videotaping of any sexual acts/contact with the dead or alive animals making bestiality a Class C felony punishable by up to five years in prison [15].

According to the World Health Organization, although the zoonoses represent significant public health risks, they are not prioritized by world health systems. Hundreds of thousands of people are affected by these diseases even though most of them can be prevented [16]. A legal offense in many states and countries, zoophilia is an important community health concern of current times. Some United States do not provide needed steps to deal with this crime and downplay the seriousness of zoophilia.

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