

A national animal welfare strategy for Ireland

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) is the lead Government department on policy matters that relate to the welfare of animals. Recently, the DAFM announced a public consultation on its intention to develop a national strategy to guide its approach to animal welfare over the next five years, writes Martin Blake, chief veterinary officer at the DAFM

This initiative is in continued recognition that animals are sentient beings, capable of feeling pain and distress, being aware of their surroundings and of their relationships with other animals and humans. Animals play a very important role in our society and it matters to us how animals are treated. Up to now, initiatives in relation to animal welfare have tended to be ad hoc and issue-led, rather than being guided by a strategic vision. Indeed, while there have been many positive developments in recent years, in many instances they have had limited visibility.

EVOLVING STANDARDS

Like nations across the world, our society's understandings and beliefs regarding animal welfare are continuously evolving. It is clear that certain practices and standards that may have been acceptable to society in the past are no longer considered appropriate. Such changes in attitude have coincided with the ever-increasing educational standards and evolving values within the general population. New research findings and information relating to animal welfare and the 'disruptive' change in the communications and media industries, which influence how the public are informed of new information, is now almost instantaneous. This transformation in the communications channels has also, unfortunately, introduced a lot of 'noise', where the veracity of information widely circulated is often difficult for citizens to verify. It is, therefore, especially important that 'trusted sources' are developed, which provide accurate, reliable and science-based information to better inform citizens' views/opinions.

Animal welfare is a complex matter – it cannot be simply measured based on a binary option of either being good or bad, based on a single criterion. Assessing animal welfare seeks to evaluate the 'state' of an animal and its experiences – how it is living and coping physically and mentally in an environment, at any specific point in time and over different time periods. Given this complexity and that new research is continuously taking place, it is not surprising that at times there is not a singular view on particular issues. Where there are new and/or conflicting views, it is important that discussions and, indeed, debate are conducted in a respectful way, using an informed scientific based approach.

BEYOND THE FIVE FREEDOMS

For some 40 years now, the baseline reference point for

assessing the welfare status of an animal has been the Five Freedoms. While the Five Freedoms remain timeless principles, they are seen by some as being overly simplistic and not responsive to newer research findings. In particular, they capture a snapshot in time and so tend to overlook long-term aspects of animal husbandry. Furthermore, they do not seek to arrive at an overall view of the welfare status of animals in terms of their mental state. There have, however, been further evolutions in research and thinking. One such theory is that of the 'Five Domains', which seek to assess the mental state of the animal in addition to simple input categories like the Five Freedoms, such as nutrition, environment, health and behaviour. While the objective evaluation of an animal's mental state is not easily assessed, this clearly introduces the principle of including animal-based indices as well as physical infrastructure parameters in assessing animal welfare.

A further approach focuses on the quality of life of an animal – often termed 'A Life Worth Living'. This seeks to evaluate all relevant impacting factors over the lifetime of an animal, recognising that an animal's welfare status may change – from day to day, season to season, in different husbandry systems, at different stages in production, etc. It recognises that an animal will have both positive and negative experiences that may impact on it to varying degrees over its life and focuses on an overall assessment of the balance between these experiences – noting that it is not a simple trade off, where enough positives might outweigh a major negative. There should always be efforts to remedy identified negative situations.

ONE WELFARE CONCEPT

There is also acceptance now that the welfare of animals and the wellbeing of humans are closely linked. This One Welfare concept builds on the One Health initiative by advancing the relationship between human and animal health to include human wellbeing and animal welfare. One Welfare brings together various disciplines, including social scientists, human health professionals, veterinary professionals and agricultural scientists to work collectively on animal welfare and human wellbeing. This approach has particular relevance in seeking to better understand the two-way inter-relationship and inter-dependency between animals and their owners/keepers, where, if these break down, it has the potential for very negative health and



Pictured at the recent Animal Welfare Conference: Martin Blake, chief veterinary officer, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Michael Creed; and guest speaker, Tomasz Grudnik, World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

welfare outcomes for both animals and humans. While animal owners and keepers carry the primary responsibility in ensuring the welfare of the animals under their care, very many other actors in society all have specific responsibilities to ensure that they meet moral, ethical and specific legislative obligations regarding animal welfare in the context within which they interact, directly or indirectly with animals.

THE VET'S ROLE

Among this broad group, veterinarians are uniquely placed to provide input into informing society's attitudes, beliefs and values in relation to animal welfare. This arises from their comprehensive professional training, their professional and ethical responsibilities and standards, their regulatory accountability and the opportunity afforded to them, where they have direct engagement with animals and their owners/keepers, this is especially true as this contact often relates to animals that are sick or injured (recognising that an animal's welfare is greatly influenced by its health status). Furthermore, veterinarians have an acknowledged 'trusted role in society on matters relating to animal health and animal welfare'. As can be seen, there is much new thinking in relation to animal welfare. Furthermore with the continued advancement of our society, we are continuously evolving our attitudes, values and expectations. Veterinarians are in a unique position to contribute to and, indeed, lead on this animal welfare conversation and journey. I look forward to the contribution from veterinarians as we progress on this journey of developing this strategy.



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