

Oral presentation

## Who is responsible for animal welfare? The veterinary answer

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### Vets and health

Veterinarians are trained to identify, cure and prevent disease in animals. Thus, as many veterinarians consider health a key part of animal welfare, one might suggest that a veterinary answer to the question on who is responsible for animal welfare would be the veterinarian. Of course it is obvious that veterinarians play a key role in not only the treatment of sick or injured animals but also to prevent disease e.g. by helping in applying health schemes, vaccinations etc. Obviously, many contagious diseases also imply a very poor welfare for the animals affected, such as in the case of foot and mouth disease, influenzas, and many others. Hence, the work of veterinarians in the prevention of such outbreaks is of great importance.

Interestingly, many veterinarians agree that disease, as for instance caused by microorganisms or injuries, causes poor welfare. On the other hand, the mental component of welfare is often regarded as less important by vets. Often the concern that animals are not able to perform behaviours for which they are strongly motivated, such as nest building in sows, grazing in cattle and horses or dust bathing in hens, is less frequently spelled out. I suppose this is as a result of the veterinary education curricula which until a couple of decades ago contained no ethology and still may be very weak in this area. On the other hand, is an animal that is infested by an intestinal worm suffering of poor welfare as much as an animal that is affected by pneumonia? Is welfare ranging from very good to very poor also in non-healthy animals? I am sure that many would agree that it does. Thus, knowledge is needed to assess the level of welfare also in sick animals. Veteri-

narians have a responsibility to take part in research addressed to understand the various welfare aspects of sick animals. But there is still very limited knowledge in this area. How does an *E. coli* mastitis affect the welfare of a dairy cow? How is pneumonia in a pig affecting its welfare?

### Vets and behaviour

Another criticism that could be put forward here is that veterinarians are often less aware of evolutionary aspects of the functioning of animals and their behaviour. Frequently, I have heard colleagues addressing the problem of piglet mortality and the need to use crates for sows to supposedly prevent crushing of pigs saying "it is either the sow or the piglets" meaning that there are only solutions to the problem giving only the sows a good welfare or only giving the piglets a good welfare. But the question should be put: "How did evolution solve this problem?" Here lays the answer to the problem.

At present, there is little understanding in the "veterinary world" what the frustration of behaviour is, how it affects welfare and what weight should be put on such phenomena. Many veterinarians misinterpret the word "frustration" into meaning what they themselves feel when they claim they are frustrated. On top of that, vets accuse biologists for being anthropocentric when they use the term. However, frustration is used as the notion on a behaviour that cannot be performed even when the animal is strongly motivated to perform it. An example is nest building behaviour in sows that can be frustrated if the sow is kept in a crate. It is shown, however, that such frus-

tration of the behaviour causes an increase in the release of cortisol and an increase in heart rate, physiological correlates that vets are more willing to accept as signs of poor welfare. Physiological changes that relate to classical "stress" responses thus seem to be accepted as signs of poor welfare by veterinarians whereas seldom criticism is put forward that high cortisol levels or elevated heart rate merely can reflect an alerted state of an animal. Thus, veterinarians have a responsibility to acquire knowledge also within the field of applied ethology.

Veterinarians have a major responsibility in society to address animal welfare issues because of their training in animal physiology, pathology, microbiology, animal hygiene etc. But this is not enough. Their knowledge must be phased together with that of biologists who have a better understanding of animal behaviour and mental states of animals. Ahead, lays the challenges for vets and biologists together to understand the mental processes in diseased animals.

### **Vets and society**

Veterinarians relate to society in many various ways such as by being the experts in society on animal health and disease, many by being employed by organizations such as animal health services, or in administrative societal functions such as inspectors in abattoirs, as county veterinarians or as district veterinarians. There are three main levels of responsibilities that one might argue that a veterinarian has for welfare in this context.

The first responsibility is to inform the person that has the animal in his or her care that a welfare problem exists. Thus, there is a great need that veterinarians have an up to date knowledge about what signs and which criteria can be used to assess the level of welfare in an animal. The animal owner may not be fully aware of the welfare problem or they may be "home blind" and would need an outside reference to understand that the state of their animals is not good enough. Here, it is not only the ability of the veterinarian to identify a welfare problem that is important but also the communication skills warranted to get the person caring for the animal to see the problem and to take appropriate actions to correct the problem.

A second important role of veterinarians in relation to animal welfare is to help reveal to society in general what welfare problems that presently exist within animal husbandry. There are many parts of the processes that pose major welfare concerns but of which politicians and people in general are not aware. Here, veterinarians must help to inform society. The fact that many dairy cows year after year are treated for mastitis, that a large proportion of our pigs suffer from pneumonia or that a high proportion of broilers are suffering from foot and leg problems

are phenomena that should not be hidden from public awareness but on the contrary should be brought forward to help create understanding of which are the trade offs between the production of cheap food and animal welfare.

Thus, veterinarians should participate in the general debate on animal welfare but this is seldom done. E.g. veterinarians employed by society continuously monitor the animals being lairaged and stunned in abattoirs. Many times, conditions in abattoirs have been poor. Should the vets hide what they see? If society cannot accept how animals are treated in abattoirs, it is the role of the veterinarian to alert not only the responsible people in the meat industry but also society.

Thirdly, veterinarians must be prepared to be part of a general debate in society on what are our obligations to animals. What care should we give animals and how much can we inflict on their freedom and their natural life? A starting point for this discussion can e.g. be found in many animal welfare laws where it is usually stated that animals should not be subjected to unnecessary suffering. It is for the veterinarian to take part not only in the discussion on whether animals suffer but also if this is an unnecessary suffering.

Over the last 10–15 years, meat consumption in Sweden has increased by approx. 50%. In large parts of the world meat consumption is much higher than what is needed from a nutritional point of view. Swedes currently use 11% of their income for food. Never in history has so little resources been spent for food and never before has food been in such abundance. It is against this background that we should view the welfare laws preventing *unnecessary* suffering to animals. And also in this discussion veterinarians have a responsibility to take active part.

In summary, veterinarians constitute an important resource in society to address issues about animal welfare. Not only in the diagnosis of welfare problems and what actions are needed to handle the problem is the broad competence of veterinarians needed but veterinarians should also take part in the societal debate about how we should house and treat our animals.