

Oral presentation

Animal health and animal welfare – is it the same thing?

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Animal health legislation and standards

Animal health legislation has a long history. We could even talk about administrative traditions, which have had an important impact on international trade. Nationally, within the EU and internationally, the legislation and the standards concerning infectious animal diseases have developed a lot during the last decades. This development has been based on the latest scientific studies and experience.

However, the basic tools have remained very much the same. Combating these diseases has traditionally been based on prevention, early detection and effective eradication measures. At the same time when the risks have increased by the global trade of live animals and products of animal origin the rules have become more science based and the technical competences have increased. Although the basic tools have remained the same in principle the approach is more strategic as in the newly published paper "Prevention is better than cure" by the European Commission [1].

The awareness and knowledge of farmers and the workers along the food production chain have also had an important impact on the general preparedness and combating the easily spreading animal diseases. Although amendments and updating are an everlasting demand depending on the newest research, it could be concluded that the control of infectious animal diseases is very well covered by the EC legislation and the OIE codes [2,3].

However, it goes without saying that the implementation of the legislation and proper action still remain a challenge. This is a fact even in the most developed countries such as the ones within the Nordic countries. It remains a challenge also in the WTO context if the internationally approved OIE standards are not obeyed.

Animal welfare linked to production diseases

It is clear, both for the veterinarians and the animal owners that the dangerous animal diseases cause both economic losses and suffering to the animals. From the welfare point of view the production diseases are often more difficult to judge. Some of these diseases are infectious but many are not. These diseases are not covered by the animal health legislation with only a few exceptions linked mainly to food safety and hygiene e.g. the quality of raw milk and mastitis.

Most often the interest of the farmer but also the veterinarian remains in the economic consequences when talking about the preventive animal health care or treatment of these diseases. Animal welfare aspect is very easily neglected. The legislation to protect animals is often very general for these diseases; such as preventing the animal from suffering and pain. Very often this legislation refers to the widely disseminated "five freedoms" including the "protection from disease". However, the neglected animal welfare may not easily be changed by legislation. More important is to emphasize it in the education and training of both veterinarians and animal owners or keepers.

The integrated approach

The white paper on food safety in 2000 launched an impressive work to update the EC legislation on food safety [4]. A total of 84 actions were proposed. Almost all have already been adopted. The approach from "farm to fork" was a cornerstone for the huge legislative work plan. This could not have been possible without recognising the inter-linked nature of food production including the farming practices. Thus, a more integrated approach to guarantee the food safety was addressed at the EU level.

The link between animal welfare and food safety has been outlined in recent reports from the European Commission. In 2002 in the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament [5] it is described "There is a growing appreciation that high welfare standards have both a direct and indirect impact on food safety and quality and that regulating and support systems in agriculture must adapt accordingly". On the other hand, the same paper emphasises the difficulty to define precisely the effects of animal welfare on animal health and food safety.

The first Action plan on the protection and welfare of animals for the years 2006–2010 from the European Commission asks "to ensure a more consistent and coordinated approach to animal protection and welfare across Commission policy areas" [6].

Possible effects on animal health and food safety have been argued on different occasions of drafting and discussing new legislation on animal welfare. One example was the relationship between the occurrence of salmonella and other zoonotic bacteria and free-living chicken vs. battery cages. The welfare standard for laying hens was questioned by questioning the benefits with possible increased risks of zoonoses. More often the estimated impact on animal health has, however, been positive when discussing the need for increasing animal welfare standards. The above-mentioned communication states that "there is increasingly wide acceptance of the link between animal welfare and animal health, and even, by extension, between animal welfare and food safety and food quality". This positive correlation has quite frequently been used in speeches both on a veterinary professional and on a political level. However, the scientific facts behind the claims need to be shown more clearly in the future.

Animal welfare legislation under development

The animal welfare legislation within the EU goes back to the 1970's. The adoption of new legislation has been much slower than in the sectors of animal health or food safety. Specific legislation for farmed animals dates back

to the late 1980's but we still lack directives for several farmed animal species.

However, compared to the other continents the Europeans have the most developed animal welfare legislation. Most likely the discussions about animal welfare and other policy areas are more limited outside Europe. In surprisingly many countries, including big traders, even the very basic legislation on welfare is still missing or is very minor as described in the above mentioned Communication. However, private companies have produced increase of animal welfare in effective ways around the world, where the legislation is less developed.

It seems that the benefits of increased welfare standards have neither been realised to improve animal husbandry and health nor to have any impact on food safety in many parts of the world. The ethical debate and interest of consumers on traceability, origin of food products and animal welfare has been most active in Europe. The level of interest has varied considerably also amongst the EU member states. This has naturally affected the political interest and attitude accordingly.

Research on animal welfare needed

As in animal health and food safety, also in animal welfare the new legislation is based on science. At the political level this demand is used on a regular basis. During the decision making process it is well understood that the research work on animal welfare is more demanding in many ways compared to animal health or to most of the food safety questions.

The need for more research on animal welfare is obvious. Without studies and scientific arguments it is very easy to postpone any good initiatives for new legislation. At the same time it is easy to understand that the complexity of the relationship between animal welfare and health and/or food safety is a challenging task for scientists. However, as long as we lack scientific work, the link between welfare and food safety/animal health is used for the benefit of the speaker and his interest group, as we have experienced. Luckily, sometimes it goes also for the benefit of the animals.

Animal welfare as a challenge globally

The global conference on animal welfare organised by OIE in February 2004 concluded "international standards on animal welfare will become a value added feature for products in trade" [7]. At the same time "the standards must be achievable and applicable to all countries". The Protocol to the Treaty of Amsterdam defines clearly the need and plans to do more to raise animal welfare standards within the EU. However, the legal issues associated with animal welfare with reference to the existing WTO

agreements need clarification. In that context the legal situation today is different from the ones concerning animal health and food safety.

Economic consequences still matter

Increased animal welfare standards in Europe have resulted in costs linked to changes in production systems and other investments. Estimations of the costs have been produced for new animal welfare proposals such as egg production, broiler meat and sows. It is clear that the economic consequences have to be calculated or estimated carefully to be able to manage the professional and political debate.

The big, still open, question is whether the consumers are willing to pay for these costs.

It is also frequently used as an argument to emphasise the competitive disadvantage relative to imported products produced with lower standards. Barometers at the European and national level prove the willingness of the consumer to pay more for products of better ethical quality. Variation between member states and different products in question exist.

However, a very common attitude amongst the producers is that in reality when shopping the consumers think more about the price than the ethical values. So, here again, more scientific work is needed based on the real behaviour of the consumer. Otherwise the speaker to support his own opinion or that of the organisation behind him uses both the results of the barometers and the expected shopping behaviour.

Conclusion

For us in Europe, and definitely not least in the Northern Europe, animal protection is a value and animals respected as sentient beings. That is why they deserve, not only the five freedoms; but proper internationally achievable and respected standards for their whole life.

The OIE has taken the very first steps towards this target. The European Union has done much more. At the national level we have legislation that covers even more and it is also more stringent in some areas where we still lack EC legislation or it has been adopted as a minimum standard.

From the administrative and even political point of view we desperately need high quality scientific research to make progress. We do not want to use the wording "the legislation and standards need to be based on sound science" to postpone new legislation or initiatives. We know that without the scientifically justifiable arguments to

improve these standards it will be used and the legislation cannot be developed.

The administration and politicians need to take care that there is more funding available and opportunities to carry out this scientific work. This is possible only by more effective networking and cooperation. This collaboration is needed across the borders. How to explain the results of the research along the food chain from primary production to final consumer is a shared task and challenge for both scientists and administrators.

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