



Global Conference on Animal Welfare: an OIE initiative

TOPIC: Areas of practical application

TITLE: Animal welfare: between profit and protection

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ABSTRACT:

Animal welfare has become a topic of public interest in many societies and, consequently, is an important field to be covered by national and local veterinary services. Different members of a society usually have different views and interests with regard to animal welfare. In this context, veterinary services may play a mediating role, bringing together producers, retailers and consumers of animal products. Moreover, aspects of animal welfare such as housing and management practices may be related to the incidence of diseases in farm animals and hence to the use of drugs and antibiotics. Some of these diseases (e.g. food-borne diseases) may also be a threat to human health.

In order to be able to play a mediating role between different sections of society, thus bringing together profit and animal protection, veterinary services have to allocate resources to this area. With regard to farm animal welfare, the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office has established two centres for the proper housing of farm animals. One centre covers housing and management of ruminants and pigs whereas the other is a centre of competence for poultry and rabbits. At both centres, research is carried out in collaboration with universities to assess the welfare of farm animals in different housing systems. Manufacturers of mass-produced housing systems or equipment for farm animals are legally obliged to apply for an authorisation to sell their products. Testing of housing systems or equipment with regard to animal welfare is done at the two centres of competence.

Additionally, the Swiss Federal Veterinary Service allocates resources to the education of local veterinary authorities, to regular contacts with stakeholders (e.g. farmers' associations, retailers, animal welfare and consumer organisations) and to public relations in the field of animal welfare.

Societies may differ in their demands for minimum standards with regard to animal welfare, and decisions are usually taken on political level aiming to strike a balance between profit and protection. However, it is important that scientific evidence can be provided as a basis and in support of such decisions. Consequently, the welfare of farm animals has to be assessed and compared in different housing systems. Moreover, conflicting aspects such as economics (e.g. space requirements), feasibility (e.g. castration

with anaesthesia) or environmental concerns (e.g. ammonium concentration in outdoor runs of laying hen aviary systems) have to be considered. The significance of such conflicting aspects may, again, differ to a great extent between societies. For example, in Switzerland battery cages for laying hens were banned in 1981, anaesthesia is obligatory when dehorning calves and, from 2007 on, farrowing crates may only be used in exceptional cases. These requirements are on a considerably higher level than the corresponding minimum standards within the European Community.

As national minimum animal welfare standards are very different, it will be very challenging to set international standards. On one hand, a certain level has to be attained to ensure minimal protection for the animals. On the other hand, national differences have to be considered. If societies legally oblige their local producers of animal products to comply with certain animal welfare standards, these producers should also benefit from trading regulations that give their products a real chance on the local market. Hence, understanding and respect are required not only towards the lower but also towards the upper end of the range of national minimum animal welfare standards.

Animal protection is often considered to be in conflict with low production costs. However, this does not generally have to be true. For example, loose housing of dairy cows in cubicle systems with milking parlours is economically preferable to housing in tie-stalls, provided that herd size exceeds a minimum of 20 cows. Similarly, group housing of dry sows using electronic sow feeders is preferable to individual housing in crates with larger herds and housing of laying hens in aviary systems can be as profitable for the farmer as housing in cages, if he can sell his eggs at a better price.

The conclusions are that (a) veterinary services can and must play a mediating role between producers and consumers, (b) local constraints have to be considered when setting minimum standards for animal welfare on an international level and (c) housing systems that are beneficial for animal welfare do not generally increase production costs.