

Perspectives on Animal Welfare from a Dairy Practitioner

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Abstract

Animal welfare continues to be an important issue in production animal agriculture. The veterinary profession has significant responsibility advocating for the welfare of animals in agriculture and can be an important voice to the consuming public on this issue, provided we maintain our credibility by fulfilling the responsibility our profession has taken.

Résumé

Le bien-être animal reste un sujet d'intérêt en production animale. La profession vétérinaire a une responsabilité importante afin de promouvoir le bien-être des animaux en agriculture et peut agir en tant qu'intermédiaire avec le public consommateur à ce sujet en autant que nous maintenions notre crédibilité en répondant à la responsabilité que notre profession a choisie.

Introduction

Animal welfare is a broad topic with many complex issues confounding it. It is complicated because the moral foundation from which the issue is viewed varies among people throughout society. The veterinary profession is no exception to this. In addition, societal values and concerns regarding animal agriculture and animal welfare change over time.

It is unrealistic to expect that our profession will come to a uniform consensus on such a broad and complex topic. It should be in our best interest, nonetheless, to find some common ground on what our roles in advocating and assuring animal welfare within our industry should be. I believe our credibility as a profession may depend on a measure of such unity.

Though we may not find uniformity on what constitutes ethical vs. unethical animal welfare, we should be able to achieve consensus on the relative order of issues. For example, it may not be unethical to dehorn a 24-day-old calf without local anesthesia, but it would be more ethical to use a local block. We should also be able to find some consensus on condemning what is clearly unethical, for example, deliberate inattention given to a chronic, grade 4 out of 4 lameness in a dairy cow that must travel a considerable distance on concrete to the

parlor three times each day. Finally, we should find consensus on practical, farm-level measures of animal welfare that could be utilized by our profession to identify animal welfare problems. A consistent approach to assessing animal welfare would assist us as a profession in advocating and implementing the proper solutions to such problems.

Several excellent articles have been published in *The Bovine Practitioner* and the *AABP Proceedings* in past years. It is not my intent to rewrite concepts already covered, but to add a practitioner's perspective to the foundations communicated in those papers. I would encourage reading the following papers: *An Overview of Animal Welfare in the U.S. Dairy Industry*, Franklyn B. Garry, DVM, MS, *The Bovine Practitioner*, February 2004; *Animal Welfare Audits – What You Should Know About Them*, Jim Reynolds, DVM, MPVM, *Proceedings of the AABP Conference, 2006* and *The Role of the Bovine Practitioner in Cattle Welfare*, A.J.F. Webster, *The Bovine Practitioner*, January 1997.

I hope to provide a logical case for defining our role within this issue; how we as a profession can approach issues similarly; and provide some clear examples of circumstances that I believe we should stand against.

Our Responsibility as a Profession

It is my contention that our profession has a responsibility to advocate for animal welfare because of the oath we have taken, in effect, with society and because of our unique qualifications. We have training and expertise in recognizing both normal and abnormal presentations of health in animals, expertise in recognizing their behaviors and expertise in recognizing the pain, stress and suffering an animal may be experiencing.

Our veterinary oath begins with this paragraph: "Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of livestock resources, the promotion of public health and the advancement of medical knowledge." Clearly we have taken responsibility for animal welfare. I find it intriguing that the oath does not predicate our responsibility in protecting animal health and relieving animal suffering upon favorable economic return or maximum productivity.

I contend that not only have we accepted this responsibility when we were admitted to the profession, but that society expects our profession to use our unique qualifications to assure animal welfare. Most people also take it for granted that each of us chose to pursue a career in veterinary medicine because we genuinely like animals. That combination of our skill set and our perceived affinity for animals makes us logical candidates to provide credible testimony to the welfare of the animals in our industry.

How Should We Define Animal Welfare?

To argue that we have responsibility is a much simpler task than to identify what level of animal welfare specifically we should advocate for and which specific cases of unethical animal welfare we should unite against.

Jim Reynolds makes the case that we should approach animal welfare from three perspectives: “animal bodies (physiologic, production, disease), animal natures (comparison to similar animals in nature) and animal minds (feelings, suffering).”² A.J.F. Webster advocates defining animal welfare “by its ability to sustain physical fitness and to preserve a sense of mental well-being or, at least, avoid suffering.”⁵ Matthew Scully, in his book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, makes the following case: “We cannot just take from these creatures, we must give them something in return. We owe them a merciful death, and we owe them a merciful life.”⁴ While each of these definitions can give us direction on how to approach animal welfare, I find the last definition particularly useful at a practical level in daily veterinary practice.

I contend that it would be difficult to argue against any of the above definitions of welfare. Therefore, I think as a profession we can use the sentiments contained in those definitions to approach animal welfare.

How Should We Assess Animal Welfare?

I believe the ability of a farm to sustain and nurture life ought to be a fundamental issue we ascertain as a profession. The mortality rate of animals on a farm can be an excellent way to measure this. In my experience, the mortality rate is comprised of animals that endure a significant amount of suffering. Rarely in the dairy practice do I see animals in fit physical condition abruptly succumbing to a death that precludes suffering. The mortality rate more often consists of animals that have been chronically affected by a cascade of accumulating diseases. In fact, the majority of the mortality that occurs on farms, in my experience, is related to production disease (diseases that occur primarily because of the production method, diseases that are virtually nonexistent in nature) or deficient animal husbandry.

Certainly, the mortality rate will not have perfect consistency between farms. It is affected by how quickly a given farm culls animals that fall below a level of physical fitness. Some farms cull most any animal that becomes even mildly ill, while other farms treat sick animals regardless of dwindling prognoses. Nevertheless, a farm’s ability to limit production diseases and provide excellent animal husbandry (thereby preventing diseases that are not production related as well) is captured quite adequately in the mortality rate. In my experience, the overall well-being of animals on farms that achieve mortality rates below 5% is significantly better than those on farms where the mortality rate exceeds 10%. Interestingly, I see farms that “treat everything” achieve mortality rates less than 5%.

There is little published information on what mortality rates across our industry actually are. National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) cites statistics reported by producers, though I find this somewhat unreliable. I have seen animals recorded in computer records as “sold” to the rendering service. As a profession, this rate could be uniformly defined (e.g. number of adults died / average size of the adult population) and therefore provide a somewhat objective measure of animal welfare throughout our industry.

As an aside, I believe unresponsive downer cows should be included in the mortality rate. Sound judgement with respect to the prognosis, potential for suffering and ability to provide supportive care is certainly required in determining how long an animal should be kept in a non-ambulatory state. Cows that remain non-ambulatory often experience a similar amount of suffering and are often a result of production diseases and animal husbandry deficits similar to the cows that comprise the mortality rate. At a practical level, they are the same net loss as a dead cow.

I consider the cull rate, and more importantly the condition of the culled animals, another key barometer of the animal welfare on a farm. A.J.F. Webster uses the term “worn out”⁵ to describe animals that have become debilitated from disease as a result of the sustained demands of the production system in which they live. Again, this fits my experience on the spectrum of farms I have practiced on. The culls leaving some farms are routinely in excellent physical fitness, achieving top market value, while culls on other farms frequently leave thin and suffering from multiple ailments and/or production diseases.

Though following cull rate will be more subjective than monitoring mortality rate, it too can be an excellent indicator of the animal well-being on a farm. Tracking the body condition score at cull, the diseases afflicting the animal at cull (or lack thereof), as well as the age at cull would provide good insight into the frequency cows are “wearing out” or becoming “broken” and the degree

to which they are allowed to suffer. As a profession, we have not developed consistent approaches to measures like these. It could be pointed out again that the contract with society we have taken in our oath puts more pressure on us to protect animal fitness than it does to encourage us to maximize productivity.

The two previous measures of animal well-being are historical measures. We can also easily assess and measure current levels of animal fitness in a herd. In my opinion, lameness is the production disease that represents the largest magnitude of animal suffering and lack of fitness in our industry. This disease is easily measured with locomotion scoring, is preventable with sound nutrition and attention to the cows' environment and, when it does occur, is quite treatable with prompt attention. I consider monitoring lameness and involving ourselves in the prevention of lameness a vital role of our profession.

Similarly, we can measure hock scores, incidences of traumatic injury, acute mastitis, failure of passive transfer and the list of routine production diseases that we as a profession are all familiar with. These measures can be viewed from the perspective that they cause suffering and increase the risk that an animal will become a "worn out" cull or part of the mortality rate.

By following such parameters, or simply by being present on farms, we will inevitably encounter situations that should be condemned. Situations I have encountered in my career include the following breaches of what I consider to be proper animal welfare:

- Keeping cows with grade 3 or 4 out of 4 locomotion scores (often "Do Not Breed" cows), making no adjustments for the required walk to the parlor or no relief from the inadequate stanchion they live in and no treatment for the condition, until she is culled because her production drops below a given level;
- Consciously allocating labor to tasks "more important" than retrieving a bull calf from the wet manure in a dry cow alley during March in Wisconsin;
- Keeping a dry cow with a fractured femur in a filthy pen with little supportive treatment for weeks to get her closer to her calving date;
- Allowing cows with incurable prognoses to suffer for days on end without providing euthanasia.

I believe that a farm's ability to sustain life and nurture physical fitness through sound animal husbandry is the most important responsibility society places on production agriculture. We have often been conditioned to believe that excellent productivity is not possible without excellent animal welfare. While there certainly can be a correlation, I do not believe it is always true. I have experienced farms that achieve high levels of productivity yet have mortality rates of

approximately 15% and culls consisting nearly entirely of broken cows. As Bernard Rollins writes, "the only model the originators of confinement agriculture had to base their thinking on was traditional agriculture. In traditional agriculture...productivity of the individual animal and welfare of the individual animal are closely connected. I believe that the early confinement agriculturists illegitimately extrapolated this connection to industrialized agriculture. Only now do we recognize that they mistakenly assumed that the productivity of the entire confinement operation assured the welfare of the animals in it."³

Once we determine whether or not a farm properly meets this fundamental responsibility of animal welfare, we can then go on to order other farming practices relative to one another based on other aspects of their animal welfare merits. I believe at this point we can go on to a discussion of how the needs of the animal natures and animal minds, as Jim Reynolds defines them, are fulfilled.

How do we Assess the Level of "Happiness" or Exclusion of Suffering a Farm Achieves?

As a society, as an industry of production agriculture, or even as a profession of bovine veterinarians, I have little hope we could ever agree on how production efficiency or production method should be balanced with the maintenance of the nature of animals and the experience of well-being in their minds. In fact, we are unlikely to agree on what is in their minds. Nevertheless, I would hope we could find agreement that we are responsible to provide the animals under our care with something of what their nature is and some things which will keep the animal "happy" in their environment, or at least enough elements to avoid distress. I consider "what their nature is" to be what they were made to be, and this notion doesn't necessarily depend on whether one believes evolution made them or whether a Creator made them. In other words, to deprive them of everything their nature was designed for is unethical.

We could agree a production system providing more elements that meet the nature of the animal and their behaviors rather than one that provides less elements meeting the nature of the animal is more desirable. In other words, we could order things relative to one another. In this context, we could agree that confining animals in a freestall barn is less ideal than allowing them access to grazing a pasture. We could also agree that confining a cow to a single stanchion without any exercise is less ideal than the freedom of a freestall barn. In a hypothetical sense, we could agree that a farm that confines a dairy cow to a stanchion without exercise, does not allow her to interact with herd mates, does not provide her opportunity to groom her calf after birth,

provides a diet that does not provide for normal rumination – this would be unacceptable animal welfare. The foundation for this assessment would be that the system does not allow the cow to fulfill any of the elements of her nature, save being a milk-producing unit.

Conclusion

When I began my career as a veterinarian, I never anticipated I would become concerned about the issue of animal welfare in our industry. I considered that to be the uninformed concern of those who did not understand farming. However, having been raised on a dairy farm and therefore having spent my entire life and career in the industry, I have become concerned it may be the most important issue we face both as an industry and profession.

Temple Grandin has been quoted as saying that farms should manage their animals so that the average

person can walk through the farm and be comfortable with everything they see. Experiences in my career make me shudder at the notion of that kind of transparency. If that kind of transparency occurred, what would we as a profession be viewed as advocating and what level of credibility would we have?

References

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