

# The Role of the Veterinarian in Ensuring Animal Welfare

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## Abstract

Food animal veterinarians are in a unique position to define their professional role in ensuring animal welfare. The field of laboratory animal medicine may serve as a model for elucidating and defining responsibilities within the agricultural animal industries. As food retail expectations for assurance of animal welfare rise, an imperative now exists to further develop the role of food animal practitioners.

## Introduction

The public assurance of food animal welfare is becoming a reality. Recently, food retailers have begun to request verification of food animal welfare through the auditing of handling and production practices used by their suppliers.<sup>2</sup> Providing assurance of animal welfare is not a new concept. Public assurance of animal welfare was federally mandated in the biomedical sector in 1966.<sup>6</sup> Congressional mandates, guidelines and regulatory standards form the basis for assessing and ensuring laboratory animal welfare. Food animal production, in certain sectors, has come to resemble the size and structure of the regulated industries engaged in using animals in biomedical research, product testing and development. An examination of the role laboratory animal veterinarians play in ensuring animal welfare can be instructive to food animal practitioners.

## The ACLAM Model

In the regulatory environment the laboratory animal veterinarian is most often charged with ensuring lab animal welfare. Other specialized individuals, such as animal caretakers, assist in this charge but the daily upkeep of animal welfare logically rests with the veterinarian. The field of laboratory animal medicine became institutionalized with the passing of the original Animal Welfare Act and its successive amendments. Prior to the legislative actions, veterinarians working in the greater Chicago research institutions area saw a need to develop laboratory animal care guidelines. By the 1970s the Public Health Service (PHS) took the initiative to define the role of the veterinarian in ensuring animal welfare and developed animal care guidelines for their own and PHS funded programs.<sup>6</sup> The oversight,

assessment and inspection of lab animal use have become well developed since the mid-1900s.

Using laboratory animal medicine as the model, let us briefly examine veterinary responsibilities encoded by law and institutional mandate. The overarching goal of a program of veterinary care is to assure that animals remain healthy and used in a humane and judicious manner.<sup>3,5</sup> Veterinarians in charge of delivering the program of care must assure animal welfare to the institution and maintain regulatory compliance. Also, the animal is viewed as a "dependent" stakeholder whose interests are considered as a condition of public acceptance of animal use. All personnel associated with maintaining the quality of animal care must be trained, and training must be documented for verification by outside parties such as USDA inspectors, funding agencies or accreditation groups.

How do professional laboratory animal veterinarians define their role in ensuring animal welfare? The American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine (ACLAM) originated in 1957 and was first identified as a Board rather than a College. In 1961 they dropped the term Board and took on the name and credentialing responsibilities of a College. Since that time they have become the *crème de la crème* of professionals engaged in laboratory animal medicine. The following are excerpts from the official website of the American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine.<sup>1</sup>

"The American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine (ACLAM) is an organization of board certified veterinary medical specialists who are experts in the humane, proper and safe care and use of laboratory animals. ACLAM establishes standards of education, training, experience and expertise necessary to become qualified as a specialist and recognizes that achievement through board certification. The Diplomates of the American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine believe that adequate veterinary care is an integral component of humane animal care and use in research, teaching and testing and further, that the state of animal well-being ensured through adequate veterinary care is essential to reliability of results from experimentation with animals. The essential com-

ponents of adequate veterinary care programs for laboratory animals include: a) one or more qualified veterinarians and veterinary technical staff, b) authority to implement the veterinary care program and provide oversight of related aspects of the institutional animal care and use program, c) disease prevention, diagnosis and control programs, d) guidance for research staff in animal methods and techniques, and e) the promotion of animal well-being.”<sup>1</sup>

The first step is to create a professional identity linked with exemplary qualifications and skills to promote, assess and ensure animal welfare. The skills must be verified through a rigorous specialized training and board certification process. Responsibilities are then spelled out in more detail. For example:

“Adequate veterinary care includes responsibility for the promotion and monitoring of an animal’s well-being before, during and after experimentation or testing. Animal well-being includes both physical and psychological aspects of an animal’s condition evaluated in terms of environmental comfort, freedom from pain and distress and appropriate social interactions, both with conspecifics and with man. The veterinarian must have the authority and responsibility for making determinations concerning animal well-being and assuring that animal well-being is adequately monitored and promoted. The veterinarian must exercise this responsibility in review of animal care and use protocols, and must have the authority to remove an animal from an experiment which is adversely affecting its well-being beyond a level reviewed and approved by the IACUC.”<sup>1</sup>

Further definition/delineation of responsibility to act on behalf of the stakeholders (animal, institution and public) without conflict of interest provide a foundation for public trust. ACLAM provides the following examples of how this responsibility can be met:

“Ensuring the adequacy of the physical plant, caging and ancillary equipment.  
Developing, implementing and monitoring sound animal care (husbandry) programs including such areas as sanitation, nutrition, genetics and breeding and vermin control.  
Establishing an acclimatization program to adapt animals to either short-term or long term restraint procedures.

Improving and enriching an animal’s environment to minimize the development of physical or behavioral abnormalities.

Providing appropriate opportunities for human-animal socialization and acclimatization to the research environment or procedures.”<sup>1</sup>

ACLAM diplomates are highly sought professionals who must ensure that animal welfare criteria are met for their employer and for regulatory compliance. Their credentials signal that they are specially trained to ensure animal welfare, train other professionals, and understand the responsibilities and requirements of a third party audit by USDA or PHS inspectors. ACLAM veterinarians are often used as third party site visitors to assess laboratory animal care in research facilities for the Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International (AAALAC).<sup>4</sup> AAALAC accredited institutions are recognized as maintaining a gold standard of animal care. Specialty associations/colleges exist for food animal veterinarians. Food animal veterinarians are likely to have access, familiarity and the trust of food producers. The call for food animal welfare assurance by food retailers heightens the need to further define veterinary responsibilities and roles in the profession. Guidance regarding professional ethics and avoidance of conflict of interest should be further developed to assist veterinarians in making right decisions about the role they will play in ensuring animal welfare.

## Challenges

Differences between the fields of medicine do exist and expose pressure points for food animal veterinarians. The first departure is the goal of food animal production to produce as many animals for marketing purposes as possible in a cost-efficient manner. Although veterinarians in laboratory animal breeding facilities may share this in common, it does not approach the magnitude of food animal production. Another difference is the razor thin profit margin of most food animal enterprises as opposed to those commandeered by the biomedical industry. Also, non-veterinarians assisted by a low or no-skill labor force typically carry out care and handling of the animals. On-site availability of a veterinarian is not the norm. Finally, the most obvious difference is the lack of regulation to make animal welfare an imperative of the industry. However, if food retailers<sup>4</sup> make animal welfare a standard for doing business, and they are honest in their goal of public assurance, an imperative will develop. These are a few of the challenges to food animal veterinarians

The final hurdle that food animal veterinarians may encounter is the perception of their profession. To

the public, the noun “veterinarian” is likely to produce a Norman Rockwell image of the person who cares for the family pet. They are not likely to envision veterinarians involved in other fields of medicine or linked to corporate or government structures. This narrow view of veterinary medicine can be a source of controversy within the profession. Veterinarians providing services to certain animal industries have been placed in the line of fire and accused of aiding and abetting animal abuse and cruelty. The criticism is unlikely to change and perhaps worsen if society develops a sincere aversion to a particular form of use. Regulation and/or third party oversight (involuntary or voluntary) of animal care for the animal agriculture industry can provide a degree of public assurance and invests authority in the veterinary community for upholding and ensuring animal welfare.

### Conclusion

Food animal practitioners should further conceptualize and define their role in ensuring food animal welfare, especially within the new environment of public assurance. Food animal practitioners are known

entities to farmers and ranchers and likely to be viewed as trustworthy. Other professionals will work in concert with veterinary medical experts to elucidate farm animal well-being and identify best practice. Finally, the field of veterinary medicine is uniquely positioned to play a primary role in the evaluation, assessment and auditing of commercial on-farm livestock and poultry production.

### References

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