

The role of councils on animal ethics in assessing acceptable welfare standards in agriculture

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The way animals are kept, treated and transported is a matter of great public concern. Commonly the issue of animal welfare has initially not been raised within the agricultural community itself nor by professionals like veterinarians and natural scientists, but by the public. And not only by radical animal protection groups, but by ordinary consumers with affection for animals (e.g. the house wife Ruth Harrison with her book “Animal Machines”), by artists (e.g. the Swedish children novelist Astrid Lindgren), and by philosophers (e.g. Peter Singer and Tom Regan). This is why scientists like David Fraser calls animal welfare for mandated science; given its mandate by the public. Thus, the concept of animal welfare used in science should be meaningful to the public.

Unavoidably, most husbandry practices lead to limitations of the freedom of animals, e.g. in terms of restricted room or high stocking densities. Furthermore an economically efficient food supply for the human population may result in increased risk of stress, disease and suffering for production animals. Production animals are kept for utility reasons, however, most people will object if animals suffer for very little benefit or outcome for humans. Some people will also claim that animals should never be intentionally subjected to severe suffering, no matter how great the benefit is for humans. Science alone does not provide the answer to where to draw the limit between acceptable and unacceptable welfare levels, i.e. what is an ethical way of keeping and handling farm animals.

In a society, the status of animals and attitudes towards animals are formed in a complex way by history, religion, culture and tradition. Attitudes are slowly changing over years, influenced by new scientific knowledge, but also by urbanisation and life standard of people. The society should be informed about husbandry conditions, and public opinions listened to by decision-makers, as a high animal welfare standard may be regarded as a public good.

Traditionally, welfare science and ethics have been regarded as quite separate issues: Firstly, the scientists using objective scientific methods, will decide the welfare level of the animals in question. Secondly, the society will decide whether this welfare level is acceptable taking both the human interests involved and animal welfare into consideration. This view may, however, be too simplistic. The science of animal welfare inevitably includes ethical considerations, e.g. what constitutes “a good life” for an animal. There is more than one view on this topic resulting in different definitions of animal welfare, e.g. which emphasise physiological functioning, feelings or natural behaviour. The scientist’s view on the concept of animal welfare will therefore depend on his/her values, and influence on both the choice of welfare parameters and the interpretation of the results. It is important that scientists themselves are aware that their work in welfare science hardly can be value-free, and that assumptions and limitations are made clear.

To enlighten this important, however, difficult issue of animal welfare and ethics, the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture has appointed the Council on Animal Ethics. The Council

is independent and advisory only. It has two main tasks. Firstly, it gives advice to the Ministry and the Food Authority on the need for new or altered legislation and changes in administrative practices. Secondly, and may be most important, the Council shall facilitate an informed public debate on animal welfare and contribute to increased awareness of welfare issues in the population. The Council has 7 members, covering a wide range of backgrounds. Farmer and fish farmer organisations propose two members to the Council, the Animal Protection Organisations one member, the animal science community (Veterinary School and University of Agriculture) one member, the Consumer organisation one member. The chair and an independent member are appointed directly by the Ministry, and are commonly persons with background from humanistic science or public life. Members are appointed for three years at a time. The Council has an employee in half time post, who gathers back ground materials, arrange meetings and excursions and do most of the writing. The council makes statements on request from the authorities and on its own initiative, but may also make statements on request from private organisations/persons if the topic is considered to be of general interest. All statements are made public.

The broad composition of the Council, encountering both experts and lay people, is of great significance. It is a necessity for avoiding the pit fall of professional “blindness”, where the common practice becomes the standard for what is accepted. The Council has consensus as a working method. To work by consensus is time consuming, especially in a group consisting of persons with different education and experiences, however, this gives the statements made by the Council a high creditability by most stakeholders.