
Understanding Animal Welfare Beyond Animal Health – Motivating Change and Driving Improvement

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■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ Developing an effective and defensible approach to animal welfare will require that we:
 - understand consumers and customers and what they want
 - empower the animal caregivers as stewards to promote and safeguard the welfare of dairy cattle.
- ▶ Today's reality is that consumers expect us to tend to the welfare of the animals in production systems; therefore, we have moved from having a social contract between farmers and their stock to striving to maintain what is now a social license granted to us by consumers to benefit from the use of animals.
- ▶ To maintain our social license we must:
 - Step 1 – Empower and if need be, raise the expectation of your veterinarian!
 - Step 2 - Facilitate change and improvement. Adopt the mind-set of “Better Management Practices.”
 - Step 3 - Evaluate the farm environment. The dairy industry has several different challenges. What are YOUR challenges specifically?
 - Step 4 – Hold your veterinarian accountable.

While many feel as if animal agriculture has been thrust into the animal welfare debate, the reality is, other segments of animal agriculture have been entrenched in the conversation for years while the dairy industry has, until recently, remained at periphery. The reason for this, I believe, may be due in part to the fact that the dairy industry is not commonly associated by consumers with the death of animals. As a result, the dairy industry has not received a great deal of attention from activist organizations until relatively recently. In spite of the frustration that comes with such criticism, the dairy industry stands to benefit from the experience of other segments of animal

agriculture because for every difference between beef, poultry, egg, pork and dairy there are similarities. Developing an effective and defensible approach to animal welfare will require that we not only recognize these similarities and differences, but also that we understand what consumers and customers are seeking and that we empower the animal caregivers as stewards to promote and safeguard the welfare of dairy cattle. Accomplishing either one of these tasks alone will not be sufficient in meeting the challenges that lie ahead. We must succeed at both tasks. To do this, we must also understand the history of our relationship with animals, how it has changed and how those changes have affected consumers and their expectations of animal care in agriculture.

■ History

For as long as animals have been domesticated there has been a social consensus which included an ethic about how animals are treated. The ethic of the early days of agriculture has been described as a “**social contract**” between the caretaker and the animals we benefit from (Rollin, 1995). This contract epitomized the essence of good stewardship. As the value of an individual animal far outweighed any benefits gained from poor management or overuse, good stewardship was essential to the success of the farmer (Rollin, 1995). Prior to WWII, during the great depression, nearly 25% of US income was spent on food and 24% of the population worked in agriculture (Rollin, 1995).

■ Today’s Environment

Due to the success of preventive veterinary medicine and innovations in agriculture, today we spend a mere 10% of our income on food and the number of people working to produce the food we eat has fallen dramatically leaving only 1.7% of the US population working in agriculture. Combined with the development of a comparatively affluent society, a sense of security with both food and finance was realized allowing Americans to become geographically and conceptually removed from agriculture and how food is produced. Affluence and food security set the stage for a natural expansion of our moral circle. Considerations formerly reserved for those closest or most similar to us were now being given to groups previously ignored or exploited (Midgley, 1983). Such considerations have been greatly influenced by the changing roles animals play in our lives. Understanding that change and how it affects how we conceptualize animals is key in understanding consumer concerns about animal welfare.

A 2009 survey (Sapp et al, 2009) revealed that when consumers were asked to rate their level of concern on a scale of 1-10, 10 being very concerned, the average response was 8 over concerns about food safety, nutrition, environmental protection, and the treatment of farm animals. While

consumers continue to express trust in farmers, they are not sure that what is done today in agriculture is still “farming” (Sapp et al, 2009). While modern agriculture has focused on efficiency and production, relying on science to prove what can be done, consumer trust has been compromised as consumers question whether agricultural systems share their core beliefs about what should be done. Today’s reality is that consumers expect us to tend to the welfare of the animals in production systems and we have therefore moved from having a social contract between farmers and their stock to striving to maintain what is now a **social license** granted to us by consumers to benefit from the use of animals (Jamison, 2010).

■ The Scope of Animal Welfare

The welfare of dairy cows covers a broad spectrum of concerns rooted in society’s views of the role animals play in our lives. Consumers have become increasingly conscious of animal welfare issues, and they expect that dairy cows and other animals involved in animal agriculture are provided for in a way that respects their nature and strives to ensure good welfare. Clearly, consumers expect that abuse or neglect of animals is neither condoned nor permitted. But beyond that obvious expectation, we build and maintain consumer trust by demonstrating that we share a common ethic about how animals are provided for and treated in agriculture. To be clear, that shared common ethic message is simply: we treat our cows well and with compassion because it is the right thing to do. The message cannot and should not be that “we take care of our cows because it makes the best business sense.”

While some organizations continue to struggle with whether or not they use the word well-being rather than welfare, others have moved on and have begun to define what animal welfare is. Perhaps how exactly we define “good welfare” is not as important as understanding what contributes to it. Historically, addressing animal welfare has been limited to concerns over basic health and preventing abuse or neglect. Today it is well established that the scope of animal welfare is much broader, recognizing that the behavioral and emotional needs of animals play integral roles in assuring good welfare. Good welfare is a constant balancing act between three components: physical, behavioral and emotional health. While one component may receive priority in the short term, the long-term goal is to achieve a reasonable balance. Achieving this balance cannot and will not be done with science alone. While we may be able to answer questions of “Can we?” with science, the question of “**Should we?**” will always be answered in the context of our current social ethic. If we are to maintain our social license to benefit from animals in agriculture it is essential that we resolve that farm practices must be congruent with consumer beliefs (we treat our animals with compassion and they should have good welfare), not necessarily with consumer misperceptions (only cows on pasture have good welfare). Our success will

be dependent on our ability to assure consumers that we are doing the right thing and our ability to prove it.

Equally important, we must be willing to educate and reconsider current practices. While much of what we do is defensible based on the available animal welfare science, we must be open to recognize where improvements are needed and be open to change, willing to endure the natural discomfort that so often accompanies change. Recognizing that change is required on both sides is the first step in building a more transparent system. As the disconnect between agriculture and the average consumer may be seen today more as a crevasse than a gap, patience and empathy will be key in developing the practices necessary to educate and reconnect our consumers with the systems they depend on while demonstrating that we are worthy of their trust and the social license we depend on.

■ **How do We Encourage and Manage Improvement?**

The good news is we already have a good model based simply on the evolution of bovine practice! Today's veterinarian can be seen through a variety of lenses depending on the farm, the practitioner, and the client. On some farms veterinarians are simply the purveyor of pregnancy, on others the ambulance and ER physician, on some they are the pharmacy distributor; yet on others veterinarians play a significant, leading role in managing herd health including developing protocols, managing nutrition, managing milk quality or at least acting as a microbiologist. On some farms the veterinarian is all of these, and on others only 1 or 2, some of which does seem to be dependent on herd size.

Some would offer that veterinarians have made their living responding to disease, death and destruction. John Wenz recently wrote an article in *Bovine Veterinarian* (2013) outlining a practice model focused on effective implementation of health management practices. The article provides a great back-drop and spring-board for expanding the concept beyond animal health incorporating animal welfare specifically. In the article Wenz explains (or reminds us) that it was in 1968 that Dr. David Morow published the first paper (in *Journal of Dairy Science*) to outline a health program based on monthly farm visits. Wenz writes that at the time, there were nearly 650,000 dairies in the U.S. with an average of only 19 cows per farm. The proposed system was founded on the idea that the single, most important factor responsible for the rapid recovery of a sick cow is early diagnosis and treatment. Therefore, rather than waiting to be called by the farm veterinarians began to schedule regular visits. Regular visits allowed for the review and improvement of management practices and resulted in a decrease in the incidence of disease. However, the most significant information presented in the 1968 paper was left to the small side-bar which detailed a "reproductive examination schedule for all cows". That side-bar was responsible for a massive change in dairy

practice as we knew it and grew into what most farmers refer to as “repro exams” or “herd checks”.

Forty some odd years later, on many farms today “repro exams” have been usurped by exhaustive synchronization programs, pregnancy test kits and ultrasound by farm employees. What used to be seen as a professional service is perceived by many as merely technical service, and demand for reproductive exams is slowing. Veterinarians therefore need to create another value. Where is there value opportunity? Some might quickly say the answer is “I’ll become a consultant!”. Unfortunately becoming a consultant is probably not the answer as there is too much competition from companies that offer or “bundle” health management consultation as “value-added” service to product sales. There is also the problem of “natural selection” as a good consultant should work him- or herself out of a job, which then requires extensive travel to find new clients. What Wenz offered in his article was a new opportunity that I have expanded into a new role of the veterinarian on the dairy.

Now, more than ever, there is an emphasis on what is known as a valid Veterinary Client Patient Relationship (VCPR). While some farmers and even veterinarians think that by simply having written protocols or a herd health plan, or even more minimally, having a veterinarian’s name on the bottle of drugs is enough, it is not. We are facing a new challenge where every farm, no matter the size, will have to demonstrate compliance with animal health and welfare standards and within that, a valid VCPR is going to play an increasingly important role. A farmer or veterinarian can write dozens of protocols, but if the farmer AND the veterinarian are not sure that intended best practices are consistently being implemented, by definition a valid VCPR does not exist.

This is a concern as the dairy industry continues to communicate the value and importance of the veterinary relationship as a critical component of the dairy story. It is not enough to simply write a protocol. Wenz (2013) reported that while a mere 50% of farms actually had written protocols, only 50% of those farms with protocols were actually following them! It will become the responsibility of the veterinarian to make sure the dairy is following them and that they are in fact working. The new opportunity I see developing is to become each farms’ Animal Health & Welfare Management professional, the Chief Animal Welfare Officer. When it comes to protocols every dairy farm needs to have a compliance officer to serve as the link between the auditor and the “free consultants”. The herd veterinarian should be in the best position as he or she should have a more in-depth and accurate knowledge and picture of the farms’ practices. And so the first step to success is to make sure the veterinarian is be playing a key role in deciding whether or not any change is successful, regardless of who recommended it.

- Step 1 – Empower and if need be raise the expectation of your veterinarian!
- Step 2 - Facilitate change and improvement. We talk a lot about “Best Management Practices”. Today we need to accept that change is constant and that what we are working on is always evolving and therefore we need to focus on “Better Management Practices.” This is a critical mindset as it allows for step-wise continuous improvement and acknowledges that not everyone will get to the finish-line at the same time or in the same way.
- Step 3 - Evaluate the farm environment. The dairy industry has several different challenges. What are YOUR challenges specifically? Are you:
 - Dehorning early and with pain mitigation
 - No longer docking tails
 - Culling based on a strategy to promote the welfare of the cow rather than size of the milk cheque
 - Managing transition cows to minimize disease and forced early culling
 - Monitoring treatment outcomes to make sure disease is identified accurately and quickly and treated effectively
 - Evaluating the hoof care provided. Is it effective? Do you have specific problems?
 - Making sure cows are handled calmly in the parlor
 - Monitoring for the effects of overcrowding
 - Evaluating and training for excellent stockmanship
 - Making sure cows are euthanized in a **TIMELY** and **EFFECTIVE** manner
- Step 4 – Hold your veterinarian accountable. The Chief Animal Welfare Officer should be responsible for:
 - Training of Farm Welfare Officer
 - Training of staff on animal care and stockmanship
 - Weekly walk throughs
 - Monthly or bi-monthly internal audits
 - Identifying and prioritizing areas that need improvement
 - Developing corrective action plans
 - Following-up to evaluate success of corrective actions

Whether the dairy industry finds itself facing increased government or customer based regulations it will ultimately depend on how we each succeed at the four steps outlined above. The good news is, we have walked a similar path before in developing what most farmers easily recognize as a herd health program. While the focus of today’s path is different, cow centric, rather than centered on production, reproduction or efficiency I am willing to predict that the vast majority of farms will find that when we return to a cow-centric approach, focusing on the welfare of the cow, we will find that the latter

elevates the former and the sustainability of the farm and dairy industry will be secured well in to the next generation.

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