

Perspectives of animal welfare at farm and group level: Introduction and overview

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If we are to bring about improvements in animal welfare, animal welfare assessment is the first step towards sustainable improvements, followed by the identification of risk factors and subsequent interventions. Largely driven by an increased public interest, which is accompanied by political strategies such as the Community Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2006-2010 (Commission of the EC 2006), the science of animal welfare assessment has developed considerably since the 1st International Workshop on Assessment of Animal Welfare at Farm and Group level held in 1999 in Copenhagen (Sørensen & Sandøe 2001). This is reflected in major research initiatives at national and international level and in the continuously increasing number of participants at the workshops.

A comprehensive assessment of welfare of animals kept on farms or in scientific establishments must take into account that animal welfare is multidimensional. It depends on many aspects including the extent to which an animal experiences positive and negative affective states and events. These may include negative feelings such as hunger, thirst, pain and fear, physical discomfort or illness; and positive experiences such as those produced by the unhindered expression of motivated behaviours (FAWC 1992).

In order to address these aspects, animal welfare assessment at farm or group level must be based on scientific knowledge. Yet, at the same time protocols need to be robust and comprise relatively simple observations and records. Validity, reliability and feasibility testing form major parts of the protocol development process. As ongoing research shows, both animal-based welfare parameters and the provision of resources, management and stockmanship are considered as useful indicators.

Bridging the gap between scientific soundness and practical constraints of recording data on-farm is the major challenge

in the development of comprehensive assessment systems. For example, the normal functioning of behavioural systems is often regarded as one of the most important indicators of farm animal welfare (Fraser *et al* 1997). However, during on-farm assessment visits time constraints often conflict with reliable recording of data on the occurrence of normal and/or abnormal behaviour.

The 3rd International Workshop on Assessment of Animal Welfare at Farm and Group level held in 2005 in Vienna, Austria, is in the tradition of the earlier meetings in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Bristol, UK (Webster 2003). In accordance with the main research areas mentioned above, the foci of the workshop were: a) behavioural measures in animal welfare assessment systems; b) methodological aspects of welfare assessment in terms of development and validation of new, promising measures, and also the refinement of 'classical' parameters where knowledge on eg inter-observer reliability or consistency across time often still is scarce; c) limitations of on-farm/in-lab assessment systems and the trade-offs between scientific soundness and pragmatic approaches, and, d) the further use of the information gathered from welfare assessment systems such as benchmarking or feedback systems to the farmer.

The papers presented provide further valuable steps towards sound and feasible welfare assessment systems and therefore the basis for welfare improvement. In this issue, plenary lectures are presented in full and original contributions to the workshop appear as short communications.

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