

ASSESSMENT OF ANIMAL WELFARE AT FARM AND GROUP LEVEL: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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If science is to be of service to animal welfare, it must do more than just study it. If our past and current research is to have meaning for the vast populations of animals used by humans for our own ends, then we must take it out of the confines of our own laboratories and into the world where these animals actually live. We need practical, robust protocols for assessing the welfare of animals kept in groups for commercial purposes, whether on farms, in zoos and other places of popular entertainment, or in scientific establishments. While these protocols must incorporate principles derived from detailed scientific study, they will, in practice, need to be based on relatively simple observations and records of husbandry and welfare; the sort that a skilled assessor can acquire at a single visit. Although simple, such assessments must be comprehensive. They should consider *both* the provision of resources, management and stockmanship that contribute to good husbandry *and* the elements that contribute to the desired outcome — good animal welfare — when this is defined for a sentient animal as ‘fit and feeling good’. Any assessment of welfare that is based only on behaviour, or motivational state, or physical appearance, or performance records, can never tell the full story. The ‘Five Freedoms’ and ‘Five Provisions’ were proposed by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (1993) as a comprehensive statement of principles that categorise the different elements necessary for good welfare and the husbandry provisions necessary to promote them (Table 1). The task for those concerned for animal welfare is to convert these principles into practice. The first essential stage in this process is to explore and map out in detail the procedures necessary to establish the welfare state of animals kept in groups for commercial purposes. This requires the following:

- Identification of practical, robust methods for assessing the important elements for the husbandry and welfare of animals kept in groups on farms or in other commercial enterprises.
- Testing the efficacy of these practical measures against established, more searching indices of animal welfare established under experimental conditions with small numbers of animals.
- Development of protocols for the assessment of husbandry and welfare for each species of concern (eg poultry, cattle, laboratory rodents). If these protocols are constructed from agreed and tested measurements and records of the different elements of welfare state, it should be possible to achieve a satisfactory degree of uniformity as to method and interpretation. Ideally, this uniformity should be achieved at an international level since welfare problems, as perceived by the animals, do not recognise national boundaries.

The 1st International Workshop on Assessment of Animal Welfare at Farm and Group Level was held in Copenhagen, Denmark in August 1999 (Sørensen & Sandøe 2001). This

formally recognised for the first time the need for animal welfare scientists to step out from the confines of their own research environments and address animal welfare problems in the real world. To this end, it rightly concentrated on the methodology of assessment. The second Workshop, held in Bristol, UK, and generously sponsored by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, has sought to build further on this methodology but also to match science with a proper concern for values in animal welfare as expressed both by philosophers and through consumer demand (which are not always the same thing).

Table 1 **The Five Freedoms and Provisions (from FAWC 1993).**

1	<i>Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition</i> — by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
2	<i>Freedom from discomfort</i> — by providing a suitable environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3	<i>Freedom from pain, injury and disease</i> — by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4	<i>Freedom from fear and distress</i> — by ensuring conditions which avoid mental suffering.
5	<i>Freedom to express normal behaviour</i> — by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.

The format of the workshop was designed to include:

- Plenary, state-of-the-art, lectures dealing with the science and values that underpin the understanding and implementation of principles of good animal welfare. These are presented in full.
- Original communications describing new approaches to the evaluation of welfare. These appear as short communications.
- Syndicates for open discussion of key issues in animal welfare. Key issues emerging from these syndicates are presented in summary form.

I wrote above that the first essential step towards achieving real improvements in welfare standards for animals kept for commercial purposes is to establish reliable, agreed methods for assessing welfare on the farm or in the laboratory, and this has been the main theme of these proceedings. Implementation of improved welfare standards, and resolution of specific welfare problems on specific units, are much larger problems that extend far beyond the scope of this workshop. Nevertheless they are problems which the animal welfare science community cannot evade. It may be relatively easy to convert new understanding of animal welfare into codes of best practice when there is strict regulation from a central body, as is the case for laboratory animals kept under the protection of the UK *Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986*. It is far more difficult in the case of the vastly greater numbers of farm animals, where production methods are dictated largely by market forces. Until the majority of the public actually chooses (or is compelled by legislation) to buy food from animals reared to improved welfare standards, then the majority of farm animals will not live to enjoy them.

The next step will be for the animal welfare science community to stimulate a genuinely interactive dialogue between the different stakeholders in the business of producing and consuming food from animals, namely (reading 'from fork to farm') consumers, retailers, producers and animal welfare scientists who speak as informed advocates for the animals themselves. The aim must be to achieve Quality Assurance standards, satisfactory to all stakeholders, whereby the value of food is defined not only by the end product but also by the production methods, which must include food safety, biosecurity and, of course, animal welfare. Quality Assurance (QA) depends on Quality Control, so all these schemes will

require effective audit. This is easier said than done. At present, there are a great many (too many) so-called 'welfare-based' QA schemes for farm animals. These are based predominantly on audit of the *provisions* made to promote good welfare (feeding, accommodation, disease control, record taking) rather than the *outcome*, namely the actual welfare state of the animals. This is fair, insofar as it is the responsibility of the animal keeper to make provision for good husbandry, but s/he cannot always ensure it. It is also easier to obtain objective records of resources and management than it is to assess the welfare state of the animals themselves. Nevertheless this is what really matters. We cannot provide an assurance of animal welfare unless we can assess it directly. The common aim of all involved in this workshop has been to make this possible.

References

- Sørensen J T and Sandøe P** 2001 Assessment of animal welfare at farm or group level. *Acta Agriculturae Scandinavica (Section A — Animal Science) Supplement 30*
- Farm Animal Welfare Council** 1993 Second report on priorities for research and development in farm animal welfare. MAFF: Tolworth, UK