



The Impact of Policy Changes on Animal Welfare

10 November 2009, Mary Sumner House, London

Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law Veterinary Association (AWSELVA) Autumn Meeting

The day was a mix of ethical/philosophical, veterinary, political and practical problems.

Philosophical and ethical weaknesses of the concept "*animal welfare*"

Rob Garner, Professor of Politics, University of Leicester.

Prof Garner took us through the history of human approaches to animals, from animals as "*mere machines*" (Rene Descartes) to the "*equal consideration of interests*" (Peter Singer). He described how people used, misused, appreciated, protected and loved animals through the past centuries into the present. Although today more and more awareness of individual animals and, often, their sentience is apparent, policies for animal welfare have little to do with animal rights and all policies are based on avoiding animal suffering. Because the public no longer accepts unnecessary suffering of animals, politicians, as ever attuned to mass public opinion, have to play the field; but it's a tricky field, because if the choice has to be made between good for the animal or safe for the human, the human wins. In economically difficult times especially, animal welfare has low priority.

We would have liked to have heard the speaker's personal point of view more clearly expressed; for example, he did say that he was defending a position that was ethically flawed and that moral philosophers focussed on what people ought to think, rather than what they actually think, but did not enlarge on this approach. He ended by saying that philosophers have to overcome their reluctance to tackle moral issues regarding animal welfare but has he overcome his own reluctance?

How we influence policy development and its effect on animal welfare

Professor Bill Reilly, President of the British Veterinary Association (BVA)

Prof Reilly told us about the role of the BVA, an organisation with some eleven and a half thousand members at the centre of all issues regarding animal health and welfare. Although the veterinary profession in the UK has not been as involved in animal welfare as it should have been over the last decade, BVA is now well on the way to influencing animal health and welfare policies with the aim of being proactive, rather than reactive. BVA has very good relationships with Defra, feeding ideas to the policy makers, lobbying effectively and working with high profile animal welfare organisations. However, it is difficult to influence animal welfare policies if the policies are already made and amendments no longer possible; so identifying issues, prioritising, timing, contacts and preparedness are all crucial. The earlier political plans are known, the more that can be done and this is especially true of influencing policy in the EU.

How does policy formulation work?

David Pritchard, Senior Veterinary Consultant, Animal Welfare, Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

David Pritchard, explained that there were four epochs of welfare policy – abuse, cruelty, care and consumerism and that animal welfare is a complex and difficult area for policy makers. Policy making is either opinion-based or evidence-based, but with increasing time pressure, evidence-based is often not possible. However policies are reviewed and amended according to lessons learned.

It is known that good animal welfare contributes to healthy food. But what is welfare? Is it based on the animals' feelings (pleasure, suffering), or on the possibility of the animal being able to exhibit natural behaviour, or on animal growth and production (healthy animals produce better). Is it ethically based, or is it centred on the people who 'give' welfare to the animal? When should the government intervene? It is always a matter of weighing the importance of interests: Should government be the guardian of welfare and quality of life for the animal – or of human safety. In other words, should welfare be an animal or human centred approach? Most public communications with Defra concern welfare and it is clear that *"mapping the landscape around the risk"* must take account of public perception as well as scientific evidence. It was perhaps unfortunate that the example provided for contingency planning for emergency response concerned the efficient killing of large numbers of poultry. Public perception of mass slaughter, however humanely performed, is unlikely to generate too many favourable headlines for animal welfare policies.

Tying policy into sustainable development of animal welfare

Peter Morris, Chief Executive of the National Sheep Association (NSA)

Peter Morris made us aware of the near hopeless situation of many UK sheep farmers as profit margins continue to fall. Contentious though it might be, it could be argued that the best cure for animal welfare is NOT to keep animals. What would be the impact of that decision? Unemployment for owners and shepherds, adverse impact on the landscape (some 60-70% of the UK land mass is grass) and loss of cultural assets. Do policy makers understand what they are putting in jeopardy by increasing costs for flock keepers and keeping the prices for sheep products low? It is more and more difficult to have enough good shepherds per flock – the ratio can be one person per 1000 breeding ewes, rising at lambing time to more than 3000 individual animals per person. This is not right morally and ethically, because welfare is at stake.

Good welfare means good production. Consumers do not appear to know or care, they choose cheap food at the expense of welfare and it is known that production of cheap food from animals increases welfare problems. The situation is compounded by the fact that the most Government and EU rules and regulations raise the bar for everyone and this adds to



the costs. It would be better if efforts could be focused on those who are inadequate keepers of livestock, or abuse the system, as this would be more cost effective. The importance of genetic diversity and desirable genotypes were also emphasised, as was the fact that the welfare of the individual animal was different from that of the flock and, that culling for welfare-related weaknesses could be promoted as a sustainable, but contentious, policy in some situations.

How does the new EU policy directive affect the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act (ASPA)

Martin Walsh, Home Office, Animal Scientific Procedures Division.

Martin Walsh is a UK delegate to the EU Parliament, and he provided a detailed explanation of how policy making goes through the various stages of production to approval. The Commission proposes legislation, the Council of Ministers and European Parliament consider and amend the proposal and, if all goes well, move towards a common text for adoption. The Commission's objectives in relation to ASPA are to rectify variations in the implementation of the current European Directive.

The speaker made it clear that the European Community aimed to set high animal welfare standards for laboratory animals, as good animal welfare and good science are inextricably linked.

After a delicious lunch a discussion panel answered a range of questions

The Panel Discussion

Why, asked a BVA representative does the UK gold plate EU Directives? David Pritchard answered that requirements for various Member states are dependent on different circumstances. Not all Member states have the same number of sheep, or the same type of sheep husbandry, for instance.

Peter Morris complained that there are no opportunities for the industry to participate in consultations and that those to whom the rules apply were often presented with a *fait accomplis*, rather than the opportunity to feed into policy making at the outset. He also addressed the difficulties of a one size fits all approach in answering a question on the potential economic and welfare implications of electronic identification of sheep, especially for hill breeds.

Martin Walsh's message was to be in discussions at the earliest stage of policy making. Get close to government officials at Defra for timely information and get ahead of new legislation. Commission planning (of Directives) is the only stage to really influence policies. He emphasised the importance of effective lobbying at European and Member State level.



There was some debate about food labelling within the EU, as this currently lacks the transparency the consumer has every right to expect in terms of, for example, the food origin and nature of the farming practice that has produced it.

Testing of animal medicines on animals raised another ethical issue. Should one animal suffer for the benefit of other animals? Rob Garner did not provide a comprehensive answer - one needs testing, so one must use an animal. There was also some discussion of same animal testing; whereas the Geneva Convention imposes restrictions on the 'use' of humans to benefit humans, there are no such restrictions for animals and some same species experimentation might, for example, kill a cat for the benefit of another cat.

Pete Goddard summarised the day: -

- The complexity of the policy landscape
- The fact that smaller groups have difficulty in finding a way of getting their ideas heard.

As ELA representatives were present Sheila Crispin and Christine Bijl.