

Boehringer Ingelheim celebrate a decade of farm animal well-being



Developments in science and technology should come together to enhance the welfare of dairy cattle and other food-producing animals over the next decade. Yet progress in our understanding of human psychology may have just as much influence on their quality of life, the audience was told at the **Boehringer Ingelheim Expert Forum on Farm Animal Well-being in Rome on June 8 and 9.**

The meeting was attended by 130 welfare experts from 17 countries and all six inhabited continents including veterinary surgeons, animal behaviourists, psychologists, social scientists and representatives from all stages of the food chain from farmers to food retailers.

That multidisciplinary approach provides opportunities to generate new ways of analysing and understanding animal welfare issues. Moreover, with the links between animal well-being and productivity now well established, the 10th anniversary of this annual forum also demonstrates the sustained commitment of the sponsoring company to improve the financial health of the livestock industry.

Steve Williams, global head of **Boehringer Ingelheim's** ruminant strategic business unit reaffirmed the company's approach



in his opening presentation at the meeting. "We have made a pledge to build and share scientific knowledge around farm animal well-being, and show where effective pain management benefits livestock and rewards farmers, while satisfying the social demands for responsible farming," he said.



Evolving attitudes

Looking backwards to assess the changes that have occurred over the past decade, Jon Huxley, professor of bovine health and production at the University of Nottingham felt that the global cattle industry was heading the right way. Yet not all cattle receive the analgesic drugs that they need. There is still a reluctance to give pain killers to young calves undergoing routine surgery that is likely to be extremely painful, such as disbudding or castration. "In the 21st century it is unacceptable for these procedures to be carried out without analgesia and it is up to veterinary profession to show leadership in ensuring that it no longer happens," he said.

Suzanne Millman of Iowa State University charted recent progress in developing objective measures for assessing animal welfare. She said there was an increasingly useful range of behavioural parameters for identifying poor welfare under laboratory conditions but there is still some way to go before these will provide practical tools for identifying problems on the farm.

Animal scientists must also continue working on ways to ascertain when an animal's experience of pain starts to constitute physical suffering, according to Daniel Weary of the University of British Columbia. He pointed out that suffering is a word usually avoided by fellow researchers, as it is hard to define and means different things to different people. But colleagues should not be 'shy', he said, in classifying a painful stimulus as causing suffering, particularly in those cases where the animal is experiencing fear and has no control over the factors causing it harm.

As animals are often reluctant to show outward signs of disease, then remote monitoring technologies may provide the information needed to assess welfare. These may include sensors that collect data on the animal's movements, body temperature, food and water intake, for example. Mike Siemens of Arrowsight Global Agribusiness suggests that such technologies are helping assessors to check that animals are properly cared for at all stages of the food production chain.

Future trends

One trend likely to continue over the next decade is the increasing concern of consumers with animal welfare issues. Many food companies share those concerns and seek to ensure that the products they sell are produced with high welfare standards, said Duncan Sinclair of the UK food retail group Waitrose, which has successfully launched a number of initiatives to provide its customers with premium high welfare products while ensuring that its suppliers are rewarded for any additional production costs.

Daniel Nowland of the Jamie Oliver Group restaurant chain said it was often difficult for customers to understand the information provided in food labelling and on company websites. So the philosophy of the eponymous company's founder was to provide clear information to its customers about the welfare aspects of modern agriculture that would allow them to make ethical choices. "Every single food purchase is a vote for the system through which it was produced", he said.

Animal welfare: The human dimension

Several speakers also confirmed that there are sound economic reasons for protecting the well-being of food animals. David Fraser of the University of British Columbia in Canada detailed the evidence to show that cattle treated with empathy and compassion by stockmen will be less stressed and more productive than those treated with indifference. He argued that



the biggest cause of serious animal welfare problems on farms was the physical or mental health problems of the farmer.

Katrine Lecornu, who runs a dairy farm in Northern France agreed with Prof Fraser that farming was an uncertain and stressful business in the current climate. It may be difficult for farmers to see things from another's perspective when they are anxious about unpaid bills, she said. Mme Lecornu acknowledged that farmers should be more willing to accept advice on welfare issues from their veterinarian, who will have the knowledge and training to help them.

Meanwhile, Alison Bard of the University of Bristol in the UK, agreed that there is scope for establishing better working relationships between veterinarians and their farmer clients. She believed that vets would find farmers more willing to relinquish old established practices and adopt new methods if vets could opt for a less paternalistic approach and tried to better understand their clients' viewpoint.

Looking forward

Whenever international groups of scientists gather together, there is invariably a call for more research into the questions raised during their discussions. In that respect, this **Boehringer Ingelheim** expert forum was quite different – one clear message that emerged from the meeting was that the knowledge needed to improve farm animal welfare already exists. The upcoming challenge is the effective implementation of research into practice.



For more information about this Forum and past events, visit: www.farmanimalwellbeing.com

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