

How to make farm animal well-being work? **Looking back to look ahead.**



During the 10th forum on Farm Animal well-being (FAWB) held in Rome last June, Boehringer Ingelheim organised a series of workshop sessions in which participants offered their own ideas on current progress and future challenges. The company has gathered and analysed feedback from participants on what they have learned during the last 10 years and what they would expect to see happening over the next decade.

The audience included **veterinary surgeons, farmers, welfare scientists and representatives from all branches of the food industry** and so the discussions reflected those many different perspectives. Topics were passionately debated and the discussions in subgroups were quite animated. However, it is fair to say there was no consensus - while some participants were amazed by the progress that has been made

around farm animal well-being over the last decade, others were actually disappointed that further progress had not been achieved. For example a large number of participants admitted to being surprised at the progress that has been made in improving the welfare of livestock through the use of analgesic products. But others expressed impatience that the industry is not moving fast enough in providing relief for animals affected by painful diseases and following surgery.



FARM ANIMAL WELL — BEING

There were clear differences in areas such as the importance of consumer preference as a driver for positive changes in animal welfare. But there was a clear **consensus on the central role of veterinary advisors in promoting good practice in the livestock industry**, and a consistent sense in which consumers have attained greater power over the last decade. In terms of the future, many agreed that technology will drive better sustainability, welfare practices and objective measurement.

Looking back

In many of their responses, participants admitted that 10 years ago, they would not have imagined the extent to which pain relief is now routinely provided for animals affected by a growing range of conditions. That is partly due to the wider availability of practical and cost-effective analgesic drugs but also reflects changes in attitudes towards the use of these agents in farm animals.

As a 'prey species', cattle are very adept at concealing outward signs of pain, but in recent years, scientists have produced evidence of subtle behavioural signs which will help to identify an animal in need of analgesic treatment. This is one factor that has driven the greater willingness of farm vets to recommend analgesic treatment for an increasing range of conditions such as mastitis and during surgical procedures such as dehorning and the treatment of sole ulcers.

The other main driver for these changes has been the growing evidence of the impact of pain on milk production and quality, and also on the cow's future reproductive health.



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We still accept a 25 per cent incidence of lameness in adult animals on modern dairy farms. Not enough progress has been made in improving the farm environment to eliminate the factors that are causing this.
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Daniel, Farmer

FARM ANIMAL WELL-BEING



Many participants noted the changing nature of the work of both farmers and vets. With greater intensification in the beef and dairy industries across the globe, farmers have had to develop more diverse skills to manage their business, such as people management and financial planning. At the same time, vets need to become more holistic in their approach to managing their clients' herds, with welfare advice becoming an important facet of their role, alongside their more traditional tasks in the diagnosis and treatment of clinical conditions.

This changing job profile may cause some level of frustration with some vets, as was evident from some of the comments: some vets were disappointed that they have to communicate the same things over and over and that farmers "don't seem to listen". Clearly, more support in developing the 'soft skills' that will help them to better engage with their clients and encourage them to make changes could be the focus of further continued education for vets.

“ I could not believe that in 2017 there are still calves being dehorned or castrated without local anaesthesia. ”

Karl, Veterinary Practitioner

While most participants were surprised at the progress achieved in improving farm animal well-being, others pointed out that there was still some way to go in eliminating all forms of treatable pain in livestock.

Some participants felt that it is the vets themselves who are lagging behind and that there is an urgent need for better engagement from practitioners in the welfare debate.

Many contributors were satisfied that over the past decade, **farm animal well-being has become a shared concern for all stakeholders in the farming and food processing and retailing industries.** But others pointed out that there are still gaps in our knowledge about the causes and prevention of welfare problems.

Further progress will depend on the quality of the communications between farmers and their veterinary advisors. **Vets need to be initiating discussions with their clients on farm animal well-being issues and ensuring that a strategy for dealing with problems is developed in collaboration with the farmer.** Some respondents felt that vets often underestimate the willingness of their clients to invest time and resources into addressing welfare problems.



FARM ANIMAL WELL-BEING

Another key observation was the growing power of the consumer. Some of the changes occurring on farms are a direct response to the changing demands of consumers. **There is a growing market for welfare-friendly products and there is no doubt that public expectations have a considerable influence on the methods used in food production, particularly in some European countries.**

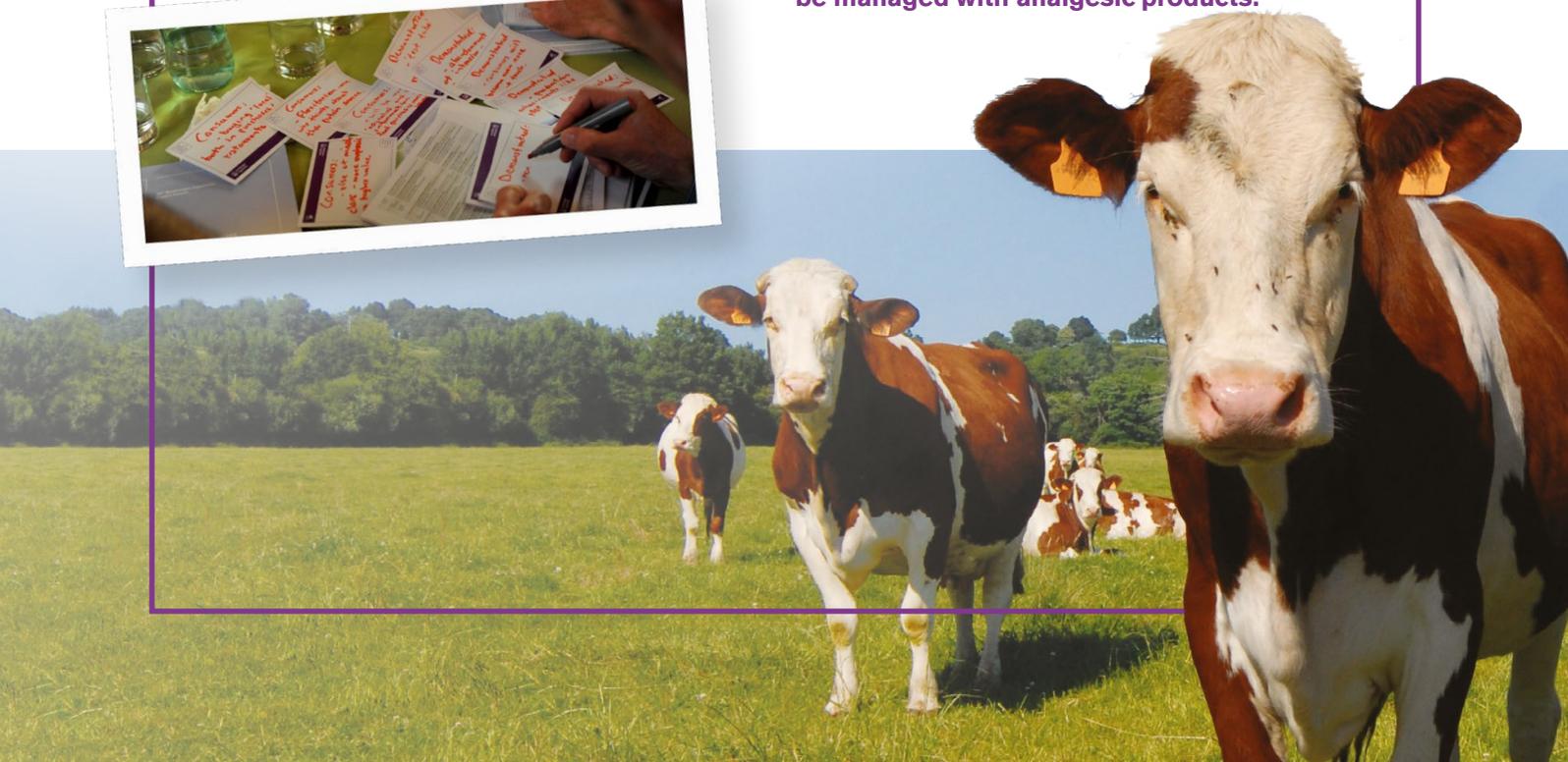
However, not all respondents were entirely happy with this development. Some noted that there is much variation in the extent of consumers' knowledge and interest in farm animal welfare issues. There was also frustration among some participants with those consumers that express unscientific and sometimes irrational opinions about the way their food is produced. Consistent and accurate labelling of food will be necessary in educating consumers in these areas, it was suggested.



Looking Forward

Participants at the Rome meeting were also asked to speculate on what the future may hold for farm animal well-being. They anticipated that the growth in the numbers of cattle being treated with NSAIDs would continue and with better recognition of pain, it will be possible to intervene earlier in the disease process for many conditions.

With growing awareness of the economic benefits of controlling pain, it will be the farmers themselves that will drive this process, some suggested. Another factor may be the increasing regulation of the use of antimicrobial drugs in livestock. This may restrict the treatments available to cure some patients with painful inflammatory diseases and **if high welfare standards are to be maintained, these conditions will need to be managed with analgesic products.**



FARM ANIMAL WELL-BEING

In future, farm vets may face increased pressure from consumers to justify their decisions on which medicines they should be giving their clients' animals. As livestock farming becomes increasingly industrial with fewer but larger units, and farmers become more highly trained, they may also demand a greater input into prescribing decisions. However, most respondents wanted vets to remain central to all aspects of animal health.

Vets can help ensure that consumers are better informed about the way their food is produced and will need to shape preventive medicine and integrated herd health programmes on livestock enterprises.



“ I hope that vets can be the champions of animal welfare and by acting in a consultancy capacity that they will drive these changes

Eric, Farmer ”

Partly this progress is expected to happen through specific animal welfare audits, which probably will become the norm as dairy processors or milk buyers will want to have guarantees on the quality of the products that they purchase.



FARM ANIMAL WELL — — BEING

The financial uncertainties affecting agriculture were a concern for some participants. These can have an impact on the physical and mental health of farmers which should be an important consideration in decisions affecting the future of farming.

It should not be forgotten that high standards in animal welfare are only possible when the farmer has a sustainable business.

Meanwhile, there is some optimism that new technologies may help improve decision making on animal welfare. Advances in automation can assist farmers to monitor the health and performance of their animals and make better use of the information gathered. This will also help provide reassurance to consumers by allowing better traceability of products and encouraging the development of effective accreditation schemes.

Changes in society over the next decade will continue to have a considerable impact on the working lives of farmers and their veterinary advisors. Consumers may be expected to become better educated and more engaged with animal welfare issues both in developed markets and across the globe in those developing countries with a growing urban middle class.

Nevertheless, while more consumers may be expected to take a greater interest in how and where their food is produced, there will still be a sizeable number of people for whom cost will always be the main consideration.

Farmers, veterinarians and the wider food sector will therefore need to ensure that they can communicate effectively with all consumers and recognise that they may have an increasingly diverse range of views.

