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Improving Farm Animal Well-being: The drivers and barriers

To make these improvements for the benefit of billions of animals across the globe, we need to understand the factors that can make it happen and those that are holding us back.

WORKSHOP
SESSION

What are the barriers to, and
drivers of, farm animal
wellbeing in Australasia and
worldwide?

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Boehringer Ingelheim
Expert Forum

Improving the standard of farm animal well-being across the world is an important ambition for Boehringer Ingelheim.

With this in mind, the 11th annual Boehringer Ingelheim Expert Forum on Farm Animal Well-being brought together over 100 specialists in animal care and well-being, among them veterinary surgeons, farmers, scientists, representatives from industry bodies and retailers. Their shared insights were at the heart of a workshop that aimed to

identify both the drivers of farm animal well-being across the globe and barriers to it. Working in groups, the participants considered the questions from a series of perspectives: government, industry, veterinary practitioners, educators and consumers. While each of the groups identified some specific drivers and barriers, a few common themes emerged.

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Common drivers

Do the right thing

A strong theme that was common throughout all the sector groups was the desire to do the 'right' thing. Many noted that good animal welfare practices are a matter of pride across the supply chain. The sector groups including consumers, vets, industry and producers all included some conscience-driven element in their lists of drivers for improved animal well-being.

Legislation matters

While almost all of the groups agreed on the moral imperative to treat animals as humanely as possible, most also recognised that formal legislative requirements are a key driver, establishing clearer goals and helping to level the competitive playing field. The consumer, vet and industry sector groups alike all cited legislation and/or accreditation schemes as an important part of advancing well-being practice. The government sector group agreed, noting that global regulations have a critical role to play.

Better health, better productivity

The producer, industry and educator sector groups alike noted a link between well-being and health, and in turn, productivity as a key benefit. The vet group also listing this as a driver, saying that increasing herd sizes and more intensive operations were also driving well-being practices as the scale of operations introduces new challenges.

Reputation management

Another broad theme was risk aversion – especially when relating to reputation – a strong driver of improved animal well-being practices. In a similar vein, many of the groups listed 'social licence' as a driver. This outcome aligns with one of the messages from the conference itself, which is that even apathetic audiences who might pay little attention to good practice will be immediately engaged in a story about poor practice. It was also noted by a number of groups that a solid track record on animal well-being is becoming a key to market access.



Common barriers

The groups also identified common barriers, in particular, challenges around funding and economics.

The cost of change

The educators present asserted that limited access to funding for continued research and development could hamper the evolution of well-being practice; while the consumer, vet, government and producer groups all noted financial cost as a barrier to change. Consumers may want food products that result from humane animal treatment across the supply chain but may also be reluctant to pay extra for it. For the producers, the barrier related to concerns about return on investment. For the vets it was about the challenge of building an economic case for both themselves and their clients.

A consensus is hard to reach

While the groups found several common drivers and barriers, they also found many that were particular to them. One thing that most stakeholders can agree on is that reaching a consensus is a challenge – that was certainly the case in this workshop. Participants in most sector groups identified conflicting views and beliefs, very different cultural practices, contradictory agendas and inconsistent standards as barriers to improved farm animal well-being. What is good for one part of the supply chain is not always good for another, and not all elements of the global market are ready, willing or able to embrace change.

The Industry Perspective

The industry group recognised that it is driven by a wide range of stakeholders, including producers, consumers, veterinarians, educators and government, whose needs and agendas sometimes contradict each other. The main challenge to industry is therefore to balance these. Market access, price and incentives also featured on the list of drivers for industry groups. Interestingly, this group also agreed that part of the push toward better well-being practices was a pathway to reduce the number of poor operators who impact the reputation of the entire industry. Barriers identified by this group included limited resources for competing interests – a question of budget and prioritising resources. At a more grass roots level, the group noted analgesic registration requirements as a barrier to the adoption of well-being as a change of practice.

The Educator Perspective

Educators are driven by sound and independent evidence of practice that improves animal welfare, which is both practical in terms of on-farm implementation and economically viable. This group noted that changing student demographics also drive better well-being, with demand for well-being training in part underpinning changing curricula. The group also noted that some universities are introducing departments dedicated to welfare research and this specialised focus will also help drive continued change. Some of the challenges for educators and academics include the fact that while they are experts in the data and science, they are not expert storytellers and influencers. The group also raised concerns that education often targets farm owners and managers rather than the frontline staff who actually work directly with the animals. In times of low returns for farmers, education around welfare becomes a lower priority.

The Producer Perspective

Producers are obviously motivated by incentives, market access and consumer demands, especially the big supermarkets. But they're also eager to explore how improved well-being practice can impact production and reproductive rates. The producer group also recognised the link between improved well-being practices and its impact on staff happiness - a topic that arose more than once during the well-being forum. The group posited that better well-being practices would lead to happier employees and subsequently improved staff retention rates. Barriers to well-being practice change from the producer perspective included the logistics around updating production systems and the complexity associated with measuring and assessing well-being plus the cost associated with buying and training to use new products.

The Vet Perspective

Veterinary professionals are motivated to reduce disease, increase production and protect public health, from both zoonotic disease and food safety perspectives. The vet group also identified environmental health, client relationships and a desire to be innovative as drivers to change. One of the key barriers to vets is limited opportunity to engage with clients. Veterinary access to farms and vet relationships with producers need to be sound in order for vets to have influence, and even then the vet professional may not have the skill to be a strong advocate for change. Vets also need to balance their desire to influence change with the fact that the farmer – their client – may be resistant, or may be dealing with mental health issues, or could be constrained by finance or lack of facilities.

The Government Perspective

Membership of OIE, political pressure and fear of reputational damage or economic loss are all drivers for government to support well-being practice change. The government group also cited trading partner pressure and community expectation as drivers. Of course, many of these same factors are also barriers. Government faces lobbying from all sides of the conversation and the local/regional/national/global government framework is complex and multi-tiered, often with vastly different legislation in different regions, even within the same country. The government group agreed that incremental change is especially difficult for government to manage, with less frequent, bigger changes easier to manage, but usually precipitated by an industry crisis.

The Consumer Perspective

From the consumer perspective, drivers include religion, the 'feel good factor' and an increasing level of education around food sourcing and cooking.

Price is always a factor and the consumer group agreed that customers are not always ready to support their good intentions at the cash register. Other barriers included fears around product safety, the validity of certification schemes, fear of antibiotics and the distance, literal and figurative, between the consumer and the farm. Additionally, simple consumer apathy is a significant barrier. It can be difficult for the consumer to hear the message in a noisy, crowded space.



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An industry keen for change

While there are many barriers, the drivers are compelling, and the workshop participants left with a strong sense of an industry that is keen for change – even if not entirely ready for all aspects of it. Boehringer Ingelheim would

like to keep the conversation going and will continue to support the Annual Expert Forum on Farm Animal Well-being with the ambition of improving the industry for all animals and stakeholders involved.



The Boehringer Ingelheim Expert Forum on Farm Animal Well-Being was held in Australia from 30 May to 2 June 2018. For more information about this forum and past events, visit:

www.farmanimalwellbeing.com

