

Working Together To Meet Citizens' Expectations Of Animal Well-Being



Making use of the latest research and benchmarking facilities and collaborating with the wider industry are key to achieving public expectations of high welfare standards.

More than 100 delegates from 17 countries met in the historic city of Prague for the 12th edition of the Boehringer Ingelheim Expert Forum on Farm Animal Well-Being. Each year, the Forum brings together veterinarians, producers, industry advocates and retailers from across the globe to discuss the latest research and findings and address the challenges facing the industry.

This year's event focused on how welfare can be improved across the supply chain to better meet public expectations and specifically asked: 'Do consumers and citizens want the same thing?'

Consumers vs Citizens

The difference between 'consumer' and 'citizen' was explained by Laura Higham, FAI Farms, UK. "Over recent years, there has been a 'citizen shift' in which individuals who wish to have a greater influence over society – including animal health – are utilising spending power to drive ethical food supply chains," she said.

Assurance schemes and food labelling have been the 'go-to' method of proving welfare standards to shoppers. However, in her address, Ms Higham raised the point about lack of clarity within the current schemes and explained how the new British Veterinary Association #ChooseAssured campaign could simplify matters by creating dialogue between veterinarians and citizens to drive purchasing decisions towards animal-based food produced to the standards. However, while evidence points towards a desire for improved welfare, consumers seem unwilling to pay more for it.

This has been studied at the University of Newcastle, UK, and was explained by Dr Lynn Frewer.

"Concerns associated with farm animal welfare and production may not correspond to purchase and consumption practices, with sales of welfare-friendly products much lower than the reported levels of concern. This suggests a discrepancy between an individual's role as a citizen and as a consumer, such that citizens and consumers have different concerns in different contexts."

Latest research

A key message from all speakers was that animal welfare does not just mean physical health.

Charlotte Winder, from the University of Guelph, Canada, told the audience: "It's essential to remember that animals with an absence of pain don't necessarily have good welfare," in her aptly named talk, '50 Shades of Pain.'

While assessing pain in humans is fairly straightforward, the absence of this ability in animals makes it harder for both farmers and veterinarians truly to understand pain levels, so using research and evidence can be beneficial.

Behaviour traits, such as lameness scoring, are some of the key ways in which veterinarians can assess pain. However, there is still a great deal of variation in this, so multiple outcomes need to be used when it comes to pain research, she added. "Using a number of different angles – looking at normal behaviours, pain behaviours and physiological parameters – to gain an overall assessment of the animal's experience is the most accurate way of assessing those pain levels."

In line with discussions around assessing pain levels, Marianne Villettaz Robichaud, University of Montreal, Canada, put forward the question: is lying time a relevant indicator of cow comfort around parturition? "Lying time is one of the highest ranked behavioural priorities for cows. Because it can be easily obtained through automated devices, lying time has been used across many studies as a non-invasive indicator of comfort."

"Overall, monitoring changes in lying time around parturition may offer some insight into cow comfort, but great caution needs to be applied when analysing and interpreting the results," said Ms Villettaz Robichaud.

New challenges and opportunities

Professor Xavier Manteca from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain, raised an interesting argument, looking at the link between antimicrobial resistance and animal welfare. "Two questions arise when addressing the relationship between farm animal welfare and antimicrobial resistance (AMR): Is AMR an animal welfare problem? And, can the use of antimicrobials in livestock production be reduced through better animal welfare?"



Professor Manteca explained to delegates that physical health is an essential part of animal welfare and so the presence of diseases – including those that need to be treated with antimicrobials – have an impact on this. "Therefore, AMR is a major concern from an animal welfare perspective. This leads to the suggestion that improving the welfare of animals could help to reduce the use of antimicrobials."

Delegates were shown a number of examples where this could be the case – including for health and welfare issues like mastitis and lameness. "Although the link between welfare and antimicrobial resistance needs further research, the available evidence suggests that improving the welfare of farm animals has the potential to reduce the prevalence of diseases that are treated, or prevented, with antimicrobials."

While much of the Forum focused on ideas for veterinarians and farmers to put into practice, Rob Drysdale, StraightLine Beef, UK, demonstrated how he has been able to use his veterinary background to utilise beef from the dairy industry to develop a product that is both ethical and sustainable.

"Beef from the dairy herd also offers potential to improve consistency and quality of product to the consumer, while reducing the environmental impact."



Global supply chains

Dr Jeff Brose, veterinarian at Cargill Animal Nutrition, turned the agenda to global supply chains in a talk about aligning the food value chain on animal welfare. Through his work at Cargill, Dr Brose developed Dairy Integrity Services – working with dairy farms and processors to align their values and protect their brand.

"The proper care and handling of animals is critically important as the global population and its demand for nutritious, affordable and high-quality protein increases."

Nestle's Robert Erhard highlighted the importance of transparency in setting up a safe and sustainable supply chain with responsible sourcing of materials. "As a leading food and beverage manufacturer, we have a robust set of guidelines on responsible sourcing."

Working with farmers to address challenges was also a key focus of a talk by Dr Anna Wilson and Katie Morton of Innovia Ltd, UK. They discussed tactics on altering farmer and veterinarian behaviour in order to make progressive changes towards better animal welfare. Delegates were given the opportunity to put the advice into practice through an insightful, interactive workshop.

Benchmarking

While veterinarians and other industry professionals are working at ground level to promote better animal well-being, this needs to be reflected further up the supply chain to allow consumers and citizens to make informed decisions regarding welfare standards in the supermarket.

Dr Rory Sullivan from Chronos Sustainability, UK, presented the Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare, an annual public benchmark of how global food companies report on animal welfare management.

Conclusion

With consumers and stakeholders in the food industry increasingly interested in the production systems behind food products, a key outcome of the conference was the need for greater collaboration between veterinarians, farmers, and the wider industry. It's also important to include the latest research findings in decision-making to ensure supply chains are both sustainable and maximise farm animal well-being.

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

