ANIMAL WELFARE

Definition

While accepting that there is no single internationally accepted definition of animal welfare, the NZVA adopts the following position statement:

"Animal welfare is the state in which an animal is in reasonable harmony with its environment, has adequate fulfilment of physical, health and behavioural needs and is not subjected to unnecessary or unreasonable pain or distress. We, as veterinarians, acknowledge the complexity of animal welfare as a public policy issue, influenced as it is by scientific, cultural, ethical, conservational, economic and political factors.

Our training in veterinary science, especially in areas such as animal health and behaviour, provides a particular expertise and interest in those areas, which confers an ability to assess – and therefore also a responsibility to promote – humane treatment of all animals, whether companion, production, stray or wild."

Animal Welfare within the NZVA

The Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinarians, issued by the Veterinary Council of New Zealand 2006, cites the prevention and relief of animal suffering as a primary role for veterinarians in society. In addition, it cites the special duty towards animal welfare and the alleviation of animal suffering as a guiding principle of professional conduct.

Under the Code (Section 1.1), "a veterinarian who becomes aware of an animal suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress must take action to ensure that the matter is effectively dealt with. These actions could include the following:

- carrying out a thorough examination of all the mitigating circumstances in the particular case and
- offering professional advice on the relief of that unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress.

"If the situation still shows no sign of being remedied and the animal is still suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress, the veterinarian must report the case to an inspector under the Animal Welfare Act via freephone number 0800 327 027 or to the local SPCA."

The NZVA endorses this view of the profession as guardian of the health and well being of all animals, domestic animals in particular, and this is reflected in the animal welfare infrastructure within the Association.

This infrastructure, which includes an animal welfare co-ordinator, an animal welfare focus group and the inclusion of animal welfare as part of a special interest branch, underlines the importance the Association places not only on animal welfare in its own right, but on providing avenues within the profession for both disseminating information on animal welfare, and receiving contributions on such matters from the profession at large. The NZVA also nominates veterinarians to serve on the Animal Ethics Committees that assess protocols for the use of live animals in research, testing and teaching.

Section C12 of the NZVA Members’ Manual provides information on the powers and obligations of veterinarians under the Animal Welfare Act 1999.

Animal welfare complaints can be reported to the Biosecurity New Zealand on free phone 0800 327 027.
Animal Welfare Coordinator (AWC)

The position of AWC was created as a paid part-time position within the NZVA in recognition of the increasing importance of and focus on animal welfare as a prime responsibility of the veterinary profession. The role of the AWC includes:

- General promotion of animal welfare science within the profession.
- Co-ordination of Special Interest Branch input into the preparation of submissions on animal welfare matters through the Animal Welfare Focus Group.
- In collaboration with the NZVA’s Resource Veterinarian, co-ordination of consultation on development and amendment of NZVA animal welfare policies.
- Facilitation of nomination of members to animal welfare code-writing groups.
- Liaison with Animal Welfare Group within Biosecurity NZ and the RNZSPCA, including membership of the RNZSPCA’s Animal in Science Advisory Committee (AISAC).
- Liaison with members of Parliament through the All Party Liaison Group.
- Dealing with enquiries from within the profession, from industry and from the public on animal welfare matters.
- Facilitation of nomination of veterinarians to animal ethics committees.
- Facilitation of nomination of NZVA members for ministerial consideration for national committees such as the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC), the National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee (NAEAC), the Australia and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research, testing and Teaching (ANZCCART) and the Animals in Schools Education Trust (AISET).
- Representation of the NZVA as Chair of the Animal Behaviour and Welfare Consultative Committee (ABWCC).
- Involvement including material preparation and lobbying in NZVA campaigns on animal welfare matters.
- Drafting of NZVA correspondence on animal welfare matters.
- Development and co-ordination of the Animal Welfare section on the NZVA website.

Animal Welfare Focus Group

This is an informal group of veterinarians whose special interest in animal welfare qualifies their acting as representatives of each of several different areas of the profession’s activities, many members of the group also being on the executive of one of the NZVA’s several Special Interest Branches. Members act as a source of information in their own particular field, and support the AWC, in particular by:

- Active promotion of animal welfare as a central focus for veterinarians.
- Acting as a resource on animal welfare matters to members of the profession, members of the public and policy makers.
- Highlighting areas of present concern within the profession.
- Identifying potential welfare problems in a proactive manner.
- Being involved in the revision of NZVA policy statements on welfare issues, and proposing new policies.
- Having input into the NAWAC Codes of Recommendations and Minimum Standards.
Food Safety, Animal Welfare and Biosecurity (FAB) Special Interest Branch

In 2005, the former Food Safety and Biosecurity Branch of the NZVA became the Food Safety, Animal Welfare and Biosecurity Branch (FAB), thus giving animal welfare special interest status within the NZVA for the first time. This move was in no way designed to separate animal welfare from the profession at large, since animal welfare is clearly acknowledged as a responsibility of the whole profession. Rather, the move was made to recognise that animal welfare has become an increasingly important issue both within New Zealand and internationally, with a major focus on the use of animals in research and on intensive farming practices. It also recognises the rise of animal welfare science, which has produced a substantial and growing body of scientific knowledge. A subcommittee of the FAB Branch concentrates on animal welfare issues.

Veterinarians on Animal Ethics Committees

One of the strengths of the system that governs the use of animals in research, testing, and teaching in New Zealand is the requirement, under Part 6 of the Animal Welfare Act 1999, that the animal ethics committees (AECs) that consider every project that is to use live animals must include three people nominated by specific organisations independent of the institution where the work is to take place.

The organisations designated to nominate these "lay" members are:

- the New Zealand Veterinary Association;
- an animal welfare organisation approved under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 such as the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals;
- local or regional government.

These external members must have no financial or other connection that might present a conflict of interest and interfere with their independent status with the institution on whose Animal Ethics Committee they sit. They are nominees of the organisations listed above and unless a substantiated reason against the appointment can be given, the nomination should not be rejected. The research institution may require the presentation of a curriculum vitae of the proposed nominee.

Responsibilities

The veterinarian on the AEC is seen as:

- an animal advocate
  - having a professional commitment to promoting and nurturing the welfare of animals
  - ethically concerned about animals
  - who can assess the physical environment and physical fitness of animals
  - perceived by the public as seeing animals as sentient creatures
- a person who is an authoritative source on the recognition and alleviation of pain and suffering and who, while perhaps not trained in the health and welfare of all species of animals used in research, testing and teaching in NZ, has knowledge of these issues as part of his/her daily work and professional training, and is also able to determine the need for and appropriate timing of euthanasia
- a professional who, using special knowledge, can bring a particular dimension to the discussion of scientific issues as:
o a person whose education in the biological and medical sciences enables him/her to judge the appropriateness of the science of a project in terms of cost and benefit
o a person willing to ask questions about the merit and methodology of the scientific research or teaching
o a contributor to the rational debate on animal experimentation issues
o a person able to contribute to discussion on the 3 Rs i.e. reduction, replacement and refinement
o as someone outside the research institution, an informed representative of the public. (Veterinarians who serve on AECs need to know and respect the community's breadth of views on animal welfare. They are there partly to help satisfy the community's concern about the responsible and humane use of animals.)

- a professional with specialist training and expertise in the management and performance of surgical procedures, and who is therefore:
  o ideally qualified to assist the AEC with site visits to observe animal manipulations; particularly surgical procedures
  o able to advise researchers on best practice surgical techniques and give practical advice on peri-operative clinical strategies which promote animal welfare
  o able to advise researchers on standard post-operative support measures and monitoring techniques used to ensure appropriate care for surgical patients

Veterinarians should be conversant with the literature on the ethical aspects of the use of animals in research and teaching.

As in other veterinary fields, professional competence requires understanding of the scientific method, health and disease of the subject species and an understanding of the legal obligations of those undertaking animal manipulations in New Zealand.

The representation of the profession on AECs provides an excellent avenue for the application of the veterinarian's professional expertise to foster both animal welfare and the advancement of science.

Animal Welfare Legislation

In New Zealand, animal welfare is covered by the Animal Welfare Act 1999. This law requires those responsible for animals to "attend properly to the welfare of those animals" by ensuring that the "physical, health and behavioural needs of the animal are met in a manner that is in accordance with both good practice and scientific knowledge". Every practical effort should be made to achieve the following five requirements, which are seen as the basis for those welfare needs:

1. Proper and sufficient food and water;
2. Adequate shelter;
3. Opportunity to display normal patterns of behaviour;
4. Physical handling in a manner which minimises the likelihood of unreasonable pain or distress;
5. Protection from, and rapid diagnosis of, any significant injury or disease.

Two advisory committees, the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) and the National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee (NAEAC) advise the Minister of Agriculture on issues of animal welfare.
Codes of Welfare – Animal Welfare Act 1999

The Animal Welfare Act 1999, which replaced the Animals Protection Act on January 1 2000, provides for the issue of Codes of Welfare with legal effect. Codes of Welfare are deemed to be Regulations, meaning that while a breach of a minimum standard in a code is not an offence, failure to adhere to such minimum standards may be used as evidence to support a prosecution under the Act, while compliance may be a defence. As at 30 June 2006, the following codes of welfare have been issued under the Animal Welfare Act 1999:


It should be noted that the other codes (Codes of Recommendations and Minimum Standards) in place prior to the new legislation had no legal status under the previous legislation and still have no legal recognition under the Animal Welfare Act 1999. They are being, or will all be, gradually reviewed and revised to the status of codes of welfare. They include:

- Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Sea Transport of Sheep from New Zealand, September 1991 Code No. 2
- Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Dairy Cattle, June 1992 Code No. 4
- Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Bobby Calves, July 1997 Code No. 8
- Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Care of Animals in Boarding establishments, August 1993 Code No. 9
- Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Animals at Saleyards, June 1998 Code No. 16
- Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Ostrich and Emu, June 1998 Code No. 21

Published Guidelines include:

- Guidelines for the Welfare of Stock from which Blood is Harvested for Commercial and Research Purposes, April 1996
- Guidelines for the Welfare of Yearling Fallow Deer During the Use of Rubber Rings to Prevent Antler/Pedicle Growth, September 1997
- Guidelines for the Welfare of Red and Wapiti Yearling Stags During the Use of Rubber Rings to Induce Analgesia for the Removal of Spiker Velvet, September 1998

All these publications are available from MAF at animalwelfare@maf.govt.nz or on the MAF website at http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/animal-welfare

Further reading