



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA SWINE EXTENSION

Monitoring Welfare

John Deen

In many disciplines there is as saying that administrators should not be trusted if they actually want the job. Likewise, I think that anyone who actually welcomes welfare audits should be questioned. Welfare audits are the result of a dysfunctional relationship between animal agriculture and the general public. They reflect the argument that farm level decisions and decision makers cannot be trusted. If we accept this lack of trust, and invariably a lack of understanding, there is a place for audits, though audits may not be the best method to address the problem.

Welfare audits are problematic in many different aspects. We have problems in definition of the elements of welfare, measurement of those elements and measurement of processes that lead to unsatisfactory welfare in animals. In application, it is fraught with personal bias, and it is conflicted by many different agendas.

We must come to the issue of welfare measurement with an understanding that our measures can only be partial, that all parties bring inherent biases, and that good communication methods are required to bring efficiencies to the process. In addition, all must admit that there are real needs for improvement in the welfare of farmed animals. It must also be recognized that all improvements are made under the restriction of limited resources. Particularly when we speak of welfare policy, where regulatory aspects are considered, we must view welfare considerations in terms of the allocation of limited resources. It really does become an economic question, though it is difficult for many parties to admit to this.

One of the first challenges in coming to a consensus on measuring and evaluating welfare is in having a group that respects each other. Too often I have seen farm owners portrayed as profit maximizing ogres, animal activists portrayed as anarchistic zealots, and veterinarians as unprofessional and pliable puppets of animal agriculture. Yet, the most frustrating aspect of some of these consensus models is self-aggrandizement by scientists. Science has been portrayed as allowing for an absolute truth, yet most scientists have a narrow view of welfare through a specific discipline.

The experts in welfare have to be defined as those who are involved in the care of animals and the day-to-day allocation of limited resources. Farmers, stockpersons, caregivers, whatever the terms are the experts we should give to the discussion. Yet, too often, these are the people that are kept outside of the discussions. We need to personify the decisions and the decision-makers to allow recognition that intentional and expert care giving is the aim of endeavors on the farm. There needs to be an argument that empowerment of caregivers is a central requirement of welfare improvement.

Audits are almost always done where there is some level of distrust between parties involved. Demand for audits has come from animal activists and meat retailers. The reason for demanding audits differs between these two parties. Animal activists argue that the majority of farmers cannot be trusted and are unethical. Their purpose for audits is to illustrate systemic deficiencies and induce wholesale change. For meat retailers, there is a desire to avoid surprises and, in some cases, differentiate their product.

Certifying animal welfare must be more than simply examining animals, facilities and processes. In my discussions with people concerned about animal care, the main question is whether there is intentional care. The criticisms of animal agriculture almost always use the words “corporate” or “industrial” as a descriptor of farms and are an attempt to portray a lack of intentional care. The real response to that distrust cannot simply be audits. The professionalism and care given by stockpersons must be given as much emphasis as audits.

There is considerable controversy and no straightforward answers. The measures can be divided into five areas: the pigs, historic performance records, the caregivers, contingencies, and production processes. There are absolutely stunning differences in the estimates of relative importance of components. These differences should lead to real questioning of the utility of welfare audits. Prioritizing measures is a very important step as it should reflect the priorities of the community. In addition, it has to be recognized that there are limited resources available for welfare audits and that there will be a bias towards simpler measures. These are measures that are repeatable between auditors and can be performed in a short period.

In the discussions I have seen three major biases. The first is to rely on experimental studies to critique processes such as castration and gestation stalls. We then are not auditing the welfare of animals but the application of the results of experimental studies. There are numerous potential failures in scientific studies. There are differences in genotype environment and management that limit the representativeness of studies. We are also limited by the breadth of issues studied. For instance, if pain is a concern, is castration the most painful condition for pig? It can be argued that lameness should be much more of a concern than castration, and yet lameness has had little study.

This second bias is towards culpability. I have seen too many arguments of whether disease is a welfare concern. Many critics are much more interested in controlling the direct interaction of pigs

and people. Thus, again, there is more interest in castration than lameness. Likewise, contingencies such as alarm systems are often underemphasized.

The third bias is against production records. Admittedly, animal productivity is not linearly correlated to animal welfare. Yet deviations of productivity, particularly in mortality and morbidity, are excellent measures of potential failures. It is interesting that human welfare measures often emphasize the mortality and morbidity records of different communities. Second to that, basic health procedures such as vaccination and prenatal care are also emphasized. We see little of these discussions of animal welfare.

Many producers express a real unease, arguing that we are on a slippery slope towards loss of control and overregulation. They are worried about academicians, administrators, government officials and bureaucrats embracing assurance programs that have real no endpoint. That concern is justified, yet assurance programs do have a real place as animal agriculture has lost a strong link with the general society. The building up of relationships, so that pork producers can be trusted, should be the long-term goal, with audits being, at best, just part of the answer.



The University of Minnesota, including the University of Minnesota Extension Service, is an equal opportunity educator and employer.

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/swine>