Ruffled feathers

An AWF Case Study

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THIS CASE CONSIDERS THE ISSUES AROUND NEGLECT IN A FLOCK OF CHICKENS

Ruffled feathers

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You are called by a new client who asks you to go out and look at some chickens that have been dying. When you arrive and meet Mrs Jones she takes you down to the chicken house to see the birds.

Mrs Jones looks concerned as she explains that caring for the chickens has always been Mr Jones' responsibility but that he was taken ill and has been in the hospital for the past 2 months.

There are 5 dead birds lying on the floor outside the house and a strong smell of ammonia as you approach the run. You open the door to see many of the birds huddled at the corner of the dark open with their feathers ruffled. The litter appears wet and doesn't appear to have been cleaned out for some time. The birds are scouring.

What should you do? (continue for answers)

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- The chickens

Having ruffled feathers is a sign of illness in birds. Huddling usually indicates that birds are cold. They have diarrhoea. A high concentration of environmental ammonia predisposes them to respiratory infections and is likely to be aversive (DEFRA Code for the Welfare of Meat Chickens and Breeding Chickens states ammonia concentration should not exceed 20ppm of air measured at bird height level; RSPCA Freedom Food sets level of not greater than 15ppm). The birds have poor welfare due to loss of physical fitness and they are likely to be feeling cold and unwell.

If they are housed on litter, with no environmental enrichment, behavioural restriction will also be causing their welfare to be compromised.

- Mrs Jones

Mrs Jones is obviously struggling to cope with her husbands illness and has no experience of caring for chickens who, until his illness, have always been well cared for by her husband.

- The vet

"…constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of the animals committed to my care." RCVS declaration

"Make animal welfare your first consideration in seeking to provide the most appropriate attention for animals committed to your care." RCVS GPC

A compassionate and sympathetic approach is required to establish the facts of the case, whilst ensuring that all is done to safeguard the welfare of the surviving birds.

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Relevant legislation and professional guidance

Animal Welfare Act 2006 s. 4 (unnecessary suffering) and s. 9 (need to protect from pain, suffering, injury and disease).

The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 places additional duties on persons responsible for poultry, laying hens, calves, cattle, pigs or rabbits:

5.1 A person responsible for
(a) poultry (other than those kept in the systems referred to in Schedules 2 to 4) kept in a building must ensure they are kept on, or have access at all times to, well-maintained litter or a well-drained area for resting;

Schedule 1
5. Any animals which appear to be ill or injured must be cared for appropriately and without delay; where they do not respond to such care, veterinary advice must be obtained as soon as possible.
6.Where necessary, sick or injured animals must be isolated in suitable accommodation with, where appropriate, dry comfortable bedding.

If any birds are to be euthanased, this would come under the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 and/or the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. The former allows cervical dislocation or decapitation; the latter by barbiturate overdose.

Further guidance is given in the Code for the welfare of meat chickens and breeding chickens (DEFRA).

What could be done in practice?

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Questions to ask

- How many birds are there in total?
- How long has the problem been going on for and how many birds have died?
- How many birds are sick?
- Are the birds eating and drinking now?
- When were the birds last wormed?
- What ration are the birds fed on and has it changed recently?
- Does the ration contain an anti-coccidial drug (you could look on the bag)
- How often are they cleaned out and when were they last cleaned out?

Clinical tasks

- Post litter examination
- Litter coccidial oocyst and parasitic egg count
- Microscopy of intestinal contents smears

Case history revealed

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Mrs Jones tells you there were 80 birds in total but 10 have died (2 yesterday and 8 this morning). The birds are not eating now but are still drinking.

She doesn't know when they were last wormed. You find an old ration bag and the birds were previously on a layers pellet containing an anticoccidial but since it was all used up a month ago Mrs Jones took to feeding the birds wheat. Mrs Jones has not cleaned the birds out since her husband was taken ill.

Clinical signs (weight loss, lethargy, scours with blood flecks) are consistent with a sever episode of coccidiosis probably due to a change in the diet with no anticoccidial drugs and poor hygiene.

The diagnosis can be confirmed by taking one of the dead birds for PM examination. Microscopy on intestinal content smears revealed a very high number of coccidial oocysts.

Recommendations

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Mrs Jones must agree to get help to look after the chickens as it is clear that she cannot cope. Impress on the client that unnecessary suffering can be caused by neglect just as easily as direct cruelty.

- A prompt and detailed clinical and post mortem diagnosis is required
- Once coccidiosis is confirmed the birds should be treated with Toltrazuril (Baycox) for 2 days in the drinking water.
- The birds should be put back onto a ration containing an anticoccidial drug
- The pen should be cleaned out, disinfected with an oocidal disinfectant and then fresh litter placed before re-housing the birds
- You should make it clear that you want to revisit the birds in 2 days time to check their progress and at that stage a reassessment can be made.
- Although the client has one a few birds a basic veterinary heath and welfare plan (perhaps only one A4 sheet, structured around the five welfare needs) should be drawn up and a plan of action to approach any future problems should be put in place.

NB. If Mrs Jones wished to slaughter her birds, this would come under WASK. The use of gas, on farm, would not be allowed in a case such as this. The use of gas as a method of killing birds and poultry on farm is permitted:

- Where restrictions on movement have the potential to cause welfare problems in relation to poultry or other birds and the Secretary of State has authorised the use of gas as a killing method on farm;
- For end of lay hens and end of life breeder birds (the Secretary of State must be given prior notification but does not require specific authorisation by the Secretary of State).

Gas killing must be carried out by a competent and licensed slaughterman. Where gassing takes place using a bird shed as the gas chamber, direct supervision by a veterinary surgeon is required. All killing of birds on farm using gas must be carried out in accordance with the requirements of Schedule 7A of WASK.

What could be done in policy?

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Increasing numbers of people are keeping backyard poultry (most probably not as many as 80 birds). There needs to be readily available, evidence-based, information on poultry health and welfare for prospective novice poultry keepers. Who is, or should be, providing this?

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About AWF

The Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) aims to alleviate unnecessary pain and suffering in all animals including working and livestock animals, wildlife, and pets. We do this by focusing out charitable activities on three main areas:

Providing a forum for discussion to highlight and promote animal welfare best practice

Research

Debate

Education

Grant funding research which has a direct impact on animal welfare.

Investing in education for the public and veterinary professions, particularly students, on animal welfare issues

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