Show me good welfare

An AWF Case Study

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A CASE ABOUT ANIMAL WELFARE ASSESSMENT, AND THE NEED TO CONSIDER BOTH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL DETERMINANTS OF WELFARE.

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You've always had a keen interest in avian veterinary work, and you've been given an opportunity, for the first time, to be one of two attending vets at the County bird show. The show is one of the largest of its kind, and a large sports hall is filled with birds in cages, accompanied by their enthusiastic owners.

Outside the show venue there is an organised protest by an animal rights group. You are advised not to wear your name badge outside, or to give interviews in the show hall to anyone you don't know, as the group have been known to threaten violence at targeted individuals.

As well as manning a rudimentary "clinic", to provide basic first aid for any sick or injured birds, you are also asked to do "welfare checks" of the birds on site. This involves walking around the hall to observe all the birds as well as you can, and writing a short veterinary report for the show organisers afterwards, which will also be submitted to the County Council. The main organiser is an exuberant, forthright character, who is also the Editor of a well-known bird-keeping magazine.

The organisers provide you with a "welfare sheet" to help you, which covers the following:

- Are the cages reasonably clean?
- Do any of the birds look sick or injured?
- Do the birds have adequate food and drinking water?

Having done your checks, you find that for the vast majority of the birds on site all the boxes on the welfare sheet can be ticked. According to the sheet there are few problems. However, you've seen some things that you feel suggest poor welfare, which aren't covered on the sheet, e.g. canaries and finches are following repetitive routes around their cages, some birds are making repeated attempts at escaping, and some birds are showing persistent fearful behaviour.

All the birds are in very small show cages, unfurnished apart from some dowel perches. Conscious of your desire to promote good animal welfare, you feel uneasy submitting a report that states welfare at the show is good. But you don't want to stir up trouble on your first visit.

What should you do? (continue for answers)

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- The birds

Is there any evidence that the behaviours observed may be indicative of poor welfare in birds?

Route-tracing is a recognized stereotypical behaviour in canaries and zebra finches. Stereotypies are repetitive, unvarying and functionless behaviours (Garner and others 2003). They are often performed by animals housed in barren environments, or by animals that are socially isolated; they often develop from attempts to perform specific behaviours, suggesting frustration (Rushen and others 1993); and they are often linked with other signs of stress, e.g. increased corticosteroid levels (e.g. Mason and Latham 2004). They are therefore considered to be indicators of poor welfare on account of the psychological distress that they may reflect.

If stereotypical behaviour develops then it is likely that the recent or current living environment is in some way unsuitable for the stereotyping animal. Occasionally, if an animal has been stereotyping for a long period, then the behaviour may be considered as a behavioural "scar" that developed in a previous unsuitable environment and has persisted through life.

Escape behaviour has been researched in mice. Welfare studies of birds are sparse by comparison. Should the benefit of the doubt be given to the birds, and the need for relevant research highlighted? (Good example of vet at coalface of welfare, identifying welfare issues and research needs).

Perches of uniform diameter (e.g. dowel) are linked to poor pedal health.

Does it matter that some of the birds are domesticated – some might suggest that they have had their behavioural needs bred out of them, but there is no evidence to support this in the scientific literature. There is evidence to the contrary in other species: laboratory rats and farmed pigs retain their behavioural needs despite many generations of selective breeding and domestication.

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- Bird keepers

Are likely to think that their birds are cared for to the highest standards (by virtue of being show birds) and may be very resistant to suggestions to the contrary. They may never have considered behavioural and mental aspects of welfare – their conception of welfare likely to be defined by traditional physical determinants such as cleanliness, body condition, appropriate diet and water etc.

- 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 Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons

- Animal rights protestors

Are students clear about the difference between animal welfare and animal rights? The animal welfare position states that animal use, in principle, is acceptable as long as the welfare of the animals is good. The animal rights position maintains that no use of animals for human gain can be justified.

Do animal rights protestors play a useful role? They often achieve media coverage of issues, but may alienate the general public due to their uncompromising views and sometimes violent and illegal methods.

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- **Main show organiser and Editor of well known bird-keeping magazine**

He is in a position of influence. He is probably keen to ensure that the birds are “well looked after” but may not have considered some of the problems associated with stress, behavioural restriction and fear.

If vet communicates effectively and persuasively, organiser may be sympathetic to their views and be willing to implement changes at the Show. He may also be willing to publish articles on avian welfare in his magazine, which the vet could write.

- **County Council**

Probably only bothered about securing revenue from their hall, and little appetite for controversy or hassle. Will seek to ensure that all activities undertaken at the hall are legitimate and legal.

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Relevant legislation and professional guidance

The birds are covered under the **Animal Welfare Act 2006 (England and Wales)** or the **Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006** or **The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011**. All the Acts state that owners have a duty of care and must provide for the five welfare needs. Clearly, these aren't being met. Is a barren show cage a suitable environment for a bird?

The birds aren't able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns. Birds like budgies are highly social, yet many are housed alone. Those that are apparently fearful are probably not being protected from suffering and inappropriate perches are predisposing them to pain and disease.

Is the whole show illegal on this basis (because barren show cages are an integral part of the show)?

The **AWA 2006** says:

"A person commits an offence if he does not take such steps as are reasonable in all the circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which he is responsible are met to the extent required by good practice."

Notice it says "good practice" and not "common practice". So, arguably, exhibitors should be making sure the five welfare needs are being met and this would preclude the use of barren show cages.

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What could be done in practice?

Is there a better way of assessing welfare than the supplied “welfare sheets”; a way that assesses both physical and mental aspects? The five welfare needs give a good framework. Could submit report based on five welfare needs – this will highlight areas of concern.

Quantifying the suffering will help to determine the scale of the problem to be addressed. Can quantify using the following framework:

- Intensity of suffering
- Duration of suffering - what’s their accommodation like at home? How many shows are attended each year?
- Number of animals involved

Careful communication with organisers is required.

The best chance of persuasion is for criticism to be backed by veterinary and animal welfare science.

Would an increase in minimum cage size and relevant environmental enrichment be enough of an improvement? This is what has happened with laying hens. Could argue that no welfare compromise is ethically justified when the activity (breeding and showing) is purely for human entertainment and pleasure or that simply increasing cage size is unlikely to significantly improve welfare at a show.

You, as a keen new vet, could write avian welfare articles for the organiser’s magazine. Would be good for education and good for raising your profile as you try to establish yourself in this field.

The show, in future years, could become an arena for demonstrating good practice and educating owners. But this will require changes in attitudes and probably careful, scientifically (and legally)- backed, persuasion!

What could be done in policy?

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The vet could write, expressing their concerns, to the BVA Ethics and Welfare Group (EWG). The EWG could gather evidence and construct a position statement which could be used to lobby for changes.

They could write to the British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS). Would they take a position against the practices that create the welfare concerns?

The profession should be proactive, not reactive, in tackling animal welfare concerns at the societal level (cf. picking up the pieces at the individual animal level).

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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

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

Debate

Education

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

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