

The Sticky Welfare Wicket

What do we need to know? What should we be thinking about?

On November 8, 2009, the first “International Educational Symposium on Animal Welfare” sponsored by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) was held at MSU. The conference was an eclectic collection of animal welfare scientists, veterinarians from all areas of practice, academia, laboratory animal, and government, ethicists, philosophers, media, and veterinary students. As a veterinarian with a beef practice and a seed stock producer I thought it was important to be there to see which way the wind blows.

Several things became clear at this conference:

- When it comes to scientifically studying animal welfare, the U.S. falls way behind Canada, Europe, New Zealand and Australia.
- When it comes to scientifically studying animal welfare, animal scientists, not veterinarians, have been on the forefront.
- U.S. organized veterinary medicine and veterinary schools have been slow to respond to issues of animal welfare.
- Veterinarians traditionally view themselves as “experts in animal welfare” yet few have any formal training or expertise.

While we could talk about how the United States and veterinary medicine are not on the forefront of animal welfare, we could just as easily talk about the recent Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) effort in Michigan to create regulations in regards to farm animal care.

But we need to start on the same page—is there a difference between animal rights and animal welfare? Animal rights and animal welfare are not the same thing—animal rights give legal rights and status to the animal that is comparable to human rights, while animal welfare involves doing the right thing in regards to animal care and husbandry. Proponents of animal welfare want to fix the system—proponents of

animal rights seeks to eliminate the system (i.e., all use of animals or interaction between humans and animals).

When you get the HSUS glossy pamphlet showing a starving dog or the Hollywood starlet clutching a pathetic kitten do you want to send them money to save the poor critters? That is what they are counting on—the knee-jerk compassion of most people, but before you send the cash, dig a little deeper.

HSUS is *not* an animal welfare organization, but an animal rights group—a well-funded, lawyer-heavy, media-savvy animal rights group that knows how to spin pictures for maximum emotional effect and maximum donations. The goal of HSUS is not only the elimination of animal agriculture but also the elimination of domestic animals (“one generation and out. We have no problem with the extinction of domestic animals. They are the creations of human selective breeding” Wayne Pacelle, President of HSUS, statement made at the Illinois Agricultural Leadership Foundation Conference, Washington, DC, 3/10/1993).

What HSUS doesn’t understand is that animal welfare is not a one-dimensional concept—or perhaps because their interest is really not the welfare of animals, but political power, they don’t care that welfare is not a unidimensional concept. An example used repeatedly at the conference, as well as a political move by HSUS in Michigan, is the housing of the every day laying hen. As veterinarians, how often have we thought of the welfare of the hen? Do we view her welfare in the same one-dimensional way as the HSUS or do we understand that these concepts transcend species?

How do we assess the welfare of the hen—or for that matter any animal? This is a highly charged and emotional issue, where people’s attitudes and beliefs color their perceptions of what constitutes “good welfare”—often the science gets lost in the emotion. Using emotion to confuse welfare issues is exploited to perfection by the HSUS.

One way to look at welfare of any species is by reviewing “The Five Freedoms,” a 1965

British report presented to the Queen and considered by many as a seminal work in animal welfare. The Five Freedoms include:

- Freedom from thirst, hunger, and malnutrition
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury, and disease
- Freedom to express normal behaviors
- Freedom from fear and distress

Few could argue that these are not reasonable expectations when considering the welfare of any animal species. Another way to view animal welfare is to examine the three overlapping circles of “Function, Feelings, and Natural Behavior,” where *function* reflects health, growth and reproduction; *feelings* relate to the affective state, including pain, suffering and contentment, and *natural behavior* reflects the ability to do things that the species does because they are a cow or a hen or a horse. For our hen, natural behaviors would include the ability to stand, sit down, turn around, spread her wings and flap, build a nest, and take a dust bath. Who would argue that those would be good things for a hen to do? Virtually nobody—it’s a “hen thing”—and hens should be able to do hen things. And this notion is how the HSUS plays the public—see a cage with a scrunched up hen that can’t flap her wings? Contrast that with a “smiling” hen standing and flapping her wings. What would you chose for your hen? The HSUS is hoping that you will buy the picture and not the science. And so far they have been right—the public and the legislatures across the nation have bought what the HSUS is selling.

HSUS states “battery cages used for egg production are inherently cruel, providing each hen with less space than a single sheet of paper to live on for her entire life. This extreme practice is so cruel that California has criminalized the use of battery cages in egg production (effective 2015); this week Michigan enacted a similar law” (HSUS notes on Facebook, accessed 11/11/09). So

INDICATORS	CONVENTIONAL CAGE	FURNISHED CAGE			NON-CAGE (BARN)		OUTDOOR (FREE-RANGE)
		SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	SINGLE LEVEL	MULTIPLE LEVELS	
Mortality (%)	●	●	○	○ 1	○	○	○
Mortality from feather pecking and cannibalism	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Bone strength and fractures	○ 2	○ 3	○ 3	○ 3	○ 4	○ 4	○ 4
Exposure to disease vectors (e.g., wild birds)	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
Internal parasites (e.g., coccidia, roundworms)	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
External parasites	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Bumblefoot	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
Feather loss	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Hen hysteria and piling/smothering	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
Risk of predation	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
Level of egg production and cleanliness	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
Use of nest boxes	○	●	●	●	●	●	—
Use of perches	○	●	●	●	●	●	●
Foraging behavior	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Dustbathing behavior	○	●	●	●	●	●	●
Air quality (e.g., dust, ammonia)	●	●	●	●	○	○	●

● = good welfare, ● = medium welfare, ○ = poor welfare

1 = Recent unpublished data indicate lower mortality may be achievable in large furnished cages.

2 = Reduced bone strength, fractures when birds are caught.

3 = Bones stronger from perch use but increased incidence of deformation of the keel.

4 = More fractures during lay despite stronger bones.

The chart illustrates the welfare tradeoffs among housing systems for laying hens, is adapted and expanded from a chart included in the final report of the LayWel project (Welfare implications of changes in production systems for laying hens at www.laywel.eu/web/pdf/final%20activity%20report.pdf). More information about the items identified as welfare indicators can be found in "A Comparison of Conventional Cage, Furnished Cage, and Non-cage (Barn and Outdoor/Free-range) Systems for Housing Laying Hens" on the AVMA website. (www.avma.org/issues/animal_welfare/cage_noncage_systems.asp http://www.avma.org/issues/animal_welfare/cage_noncage_systems.asp). This chart shows that there are welfare advantages and disadvantages to every housing system.

that's it—battery cages are cruel and they should be banned because other systems are more humane. Well, are they really? If you believe in the five freedoms of animal welfare we have just allowed the hen to express her normal behavior—but at what cost to the hen?

There has been extensive research on housing and welfare of the laying hen, and if you are interested you can find the summary in the LayWel Report. This report has been summarized on the AVMA's web page using the traffic light system—good welfare is "green," bad welfare is "red," and intermediate welfare is "yellow." This graphic allows you to easily see the trade-offs in the various housing systems.

There is science to guide us in our welfare decisions. Unfortunately, HSUS preys on the emotions of the uninformed public, and in the end the welfare of the animal may actually suffer. What are some of the facts in the LayWel report? Birds in battery cages may not have the ability to flap their wings, but they are much less likely to be eaten by their pen mates or die in the cage. Is being pecked to death and eaten by a fellow hen a greater welfare concern than not being able to flap her wings? Hens in battery cages can't go into a nest box, but are less likely to have parasites than their free range counterparts, that are more likely to be eaten by predators. Which hen has the better welfare? The free-range hens will have decreased production and decreased cleanliness than any of their

caged counterparts. Hens in non cage single and multiple level housing are more likely to be able to engage in dust bathing, but the air quality suffers, and they are more likely to be smothered, develop bumble foot and be infected with parasites. So which hen has the best welfare? The dead free-range hen who could flap her wings before she was eaten by the neighborhood hawk or the hen in the battery cage that can't flap her wings but is disease free and alive? What are the appropriate trade-offs for hen welfare? The HSUS doesn't look at welfare of the hen in a global total way—they pick an easy sell without consideration of the consequences to the hen.

Maintaining good welfare within housing systems usually involves trade-offs. For example, housing systems that allow hens to perform natural behaviors (e.g., nest building for laying hens) may, in fact, result in more challenges for disease and injury control. Conversely, improving disease and injury control by more intensively confining hens can limit the hens' freedom of movement and

ability to engage in normal behaviors.

Now you may say to yourself- I don't raise chickens—what does the hen have to do with me? Step back, and take a broader view—we are not only veterinarians, but most of us share our lives with animals—we train dogs, ride horses, tend to livestock, herd cats—we treat and care for animals of many species. Do you think about pain control when dehorning calves, castrating cats, spaying cogs? Do you follow AVMA guidelines for euthanasia or just figure it is OK to kill a horse with Roccal? Does the cost of doing things right make you cut corners? What would the public think if you ended up on YouTube? Could you defend what you do? Is there science to state that what you are doing is "right"? Is there a better way to do it? If we don't want people telling us how to do things, now is the time to review what we do and answer Dr. Keith Sterner's question—*Would this pass the "60 Minutes" test?* We need to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

— Dr. Lana Kaiser, Mason, MI