

# Viewpoint

## Lives worth living?

To date, animal welfare measures have focused primarily on the avoidance of cruelty and the provision of basic needs. **Christopher Wathes**, chairman of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, argues that it is important to take animals' positive experiences into account as well

*'THE question is not, "Can they reason?" nor, "Can they talk?" but rather, "Can they suffer?"'*  
– Jeremy Bentham, English philosopher, 1748-1832.

Bentham's dictum has been the foundation of British policy on the welfare of farm and other animals for the past two centuries. Indeed, an historical review of British legislation reveals only minor changes in the expectation that animals should not suffer, once it was recognised that they were more than chattels. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales and similar legislation in Scotland now requires that an animal's needs are provided. These needs are based on the Farm Animal Welfare Council's (FAWC's) 'Five Freedoms'. These were first promulgated in 1979 and have their origins in the 1965 Brambell inquiry into the welfare of animals kept under intensive livestock husbandry systems. The Brambell inquiry concluded that more was needed to protect animal welfare than just preventing wanton cruelty.

**'Determining whether an animal has a life worth living requires that both positive and negative experiences are counted'**

The FAWC's recent report, 'Farm Animal Welfare in Great Britain: Past, Present and Future' (FAWC 2009), builds on Bentham's sturdy foundations and proposes that acceptable welfare – the so-called minimum standard – should move beyond the current test of whether the animal suffers, there is unnecessary pain or distress or its needs are met, to a new standard of whether the animal has a life worth living, from the animal's point of view. This positive approach to animal



welfare is a logical development in man's humane treatment of farm animals.

At first sight, the notion of 'a life worth living' may seem strange when considering a farm animal. Yet, it is very familiar to many veterinarians and farmers who are often called upon to cull, in a swift and humane manner, animals in ill health. Regularly, judgements are made about an animal's welfare, such that if it's not possible to treat a disease or to improve an aspect of husbandry then the animal is culled on humanitarian grounds. The inference of the concept is that the positive experiences outweigh the negative and that certain harms are not caused. An animal that does not have a life worth living – from its point of view – and whose circumstances cannot be improved to achieve such a life is, literally, better off dead.

Straightaway, this new standard puts everyone on the front foot and moves beyond the Five Freedoms with their heavy emphasis on avoidance of negative experiences. While, of course, it is and will continue to be absolutely necessary to punish those who are cruel, cause animals to suffer deliberately and unnecessarily or do not provide for an animal's needs, we can now celebrate the good things in an animal's life while continuing to abhor the bad.

Determining whether an animal has a life worth living requires that both positive

and negative experiences are counted. Traditionally, veterinarians and stockmen have been keen observers of negative experiences and associated affective states, such as pain, anxiety, fear and discomfort. The FAWC's proposal entails equal consideration of positive experiences and their affective states too (for example, play

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and contentment), as the best observers have always done. There is also a role to develop the concept of 'iceberg indicators' of welfare; that is, the key physiological, behavioural and psychological signs of wellbeing that indicate that all is well, such as body condition, normal behaviour and alertness. Just as the sighting of an iceberg signals that 90 per cent of its bulk is below the water line, and we ignore its tip at our peril, so iceberg indicators are critical signs of welfare. Few good observers (mentally) tick 100 or more boxes when assessing animals; instead, they use iceberg indicators to decide whether to leave well alone or investigate. Teaching veterinary students about iceberg indicators and thus making them good observers is an essential part of veterinary education and should be a cornerstone of the curriculum.

'A life worth living' is a statement about an animal's quality of life during its lifetime, including the manner of its death. A reasoned judgement is required, and, because animals cannot speak, we largely have to rely on external observable signs and cues ('outcome-based measures' in the jargon), just as a physician does when dealing with an unspeaking infant. Who is to make the judgement? Veterinarians, inspectors from assurance schemes and stockmen can all play their part on the basis of their expertise, role and interest. What is needed is regular assessment during an animal's lifetime using validated methods, including iceberg indicators. Many will

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argue that it will never be possible to make the judgement from the animal's point of view. But this is familiar territory for veterinarians and stockmen, even if interpretation of observable signs of welfare is subjective: in any case, the courts will be the ultimate arbiter if the new standard is given the force of the law.

Quality of life is a new way of looking at farm animal welfare. It is a universal concept that can be applied to all animals, regardless of their use or value to us. Quality of life may be compromised by the powerful economic and other forces that combine to determine an animal's collective experiences. The diagram above shows a quality of life range from 'a life not worth living' to 'a good life'. The

uppermost category indicates that an even higher standard than 'a life worth living' may be experienced by some animals. The FAWC report says: 'The requirements for "a good life" go well beyond those for the lower level. Not only must there be full compliance with the law but also with examples of good practice described in the Welfare Code. In addition, good welfare should be a main aim of husbandry with disease controlled by the strictest measures and with minimal prevalence, normal behaviour, availability of environmental choices and harmless wants, a ban on most, if not all, mutilations, certain husbandry practices (including the manner of death) prescribed or forbidden, opportunities provided for an animal's comfort, pleasure, interest and confidence, and the highest standards of veterinary care. Above all else, the highest standard of stockmanship has to be provided.'

Quality of life can be used for classification and decision making. For example, are the marketing claims of a farm assurance scheme consistent with 'a life worth living' or 'a good life'? Which investment – in training stockmen or in bricks and mortar – will yield the greater quality of life return? If an animal is being used in research, what are the quality of life costs to it and what are the quality of life benefits to other animals, including

humans? (The Animals [Scientific Procedures] Act 1986 states clearly: 'In determining whether, and on what terms, to grant a project licence the Secretary of State shall weigh the likely adverse effects on the animals concerned against the benefit likely to accrue'. In other words, a quality of life balance sheet should be computed.)

The FAWC's proposal should sit comfortably with the veterinarian's declaration on admission to the Royal College to ensure the welfare of animals. After all, while the veterinarian's *raison d'être* is normally to treat disease, we can all rejoice in the rich lives of farm and other animals. It would be a damning indictment of Government and commercial policies since Brambell's inquiry if the intention had not been to give each and every farm animal a life worth living.

*'The question is not just, "Do they suffer?" nor, "Are their needs met?" but rather, "Do they have a life worth living?"'* – Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2010.

## Reference

FAWC (2009) Farm Animal Welfare in Great Britain: Past, Present and Future. [www.fawc.org.uk/pdf/ppf-report091012.pdf](http://www.fawc.org.uk/pdf/ppf-report091012.pdf). Accessed February 9, 2010

doi: 10.1136/vr.c849

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*Veterinary Record* 2010 166: 468-469  
doi: 10.1136/vr.c849

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