ANIMAL WELFARE:

Seeing the forest AND the trees

American Veterinary Medical Association
What is animal welfare?

Simply put, “welfare” means overall mental and physical health; protecting an animal’s welfare means providing for its mental and physical needs. Ensuring animal welfare is a human responsibility that addresses all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, nutrition, disease prevention and treatment, responsible care, humane handling, and, when necessary, humane euthanasia. There are numerous perspectives on, and definitions of animal welfare, that are influenced by a person’s experiences. There are also various means of measuring animal welfare – health/productivity, behavior, and physiological responses.

The American Veterinary Medical Association defined its commitment to animal welfare through the adoption of the following Animal Welfare Principles for guidance as the Association develops policies and takes action to ensure the welfare of animals:

- The AVMA, as a medical authority for the health and welfare of animals, offers the following eight integrated principles for developing and evaluating animal welfare policies, resolutions, and actions.
  - The responsible use of animals for human purposes, such as companionship, food, fiber, recreation, work, education, exhibition, and research conducted for the benefit of both humans and animals, is consistent with the Veterinarian’s Oath.
  - Decisions regarding animal care, use, and welfare shall be made by balancing scientific knowledge and professional judgment with consideration of ethical and societal values.
  - Animals must be provided water, food, proper handling, health care, and an environment appropriate to their care and use, with thoughtful consideration for their species-typical biology and behavior.
  - Animals should be cared for in ways that minimize fear, pain, stress, and suffering.
  - Procedures related to animal housing, management, care, and use should be continuously evaluated, and when indicated, refined or replaced.
  - Conservation and management of animal populations should be humane, socially responsible, and scientifically prudent.
Animals shall be treated with respect and dignity throughout their lives and, when necessary, provided a humane death.

The veterinary profession shall continually strive to improve animal health and welfare through scientific research, education, collaboration, advocacy, and the development of legislation and regulations.

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Each component of an animal care system does not exist in a vacuum, independent of all other components. In fact, all components of animal care are interrelated, and each affects the entire system as a whole. Although a superficial evaluation of one isolated part of an animal care system may lead one to think that the animals’ welfare is being compromised, it is critical to evaluate the whole system when assessing animal welfare.

Changing an animal care system so it is more visually or emotionally pleasant for people may actually compromise the animals’ welfare by increasing risk of injury, disease, or predation. When considering change, thoroughly evaluate welfare from all perspectives – not just one.
Animal production systems and animal welfare

“Animal production systems” include farms and other facilities involved in the responsible use of animals for food and fiber. Because the quality of food or fiber produced is affected by the animal’s health, preserving the animal’s health and well-being can have a positive effect on production. Protecting animal welfare can provide economic, as well as ethical, benefits. However, animal production systems are also balancing acts involving animal needs, human needs (including the safety and health of persons working with the animals), food safety, environmental concerns, and economics; after all, ensuring an abundant and safe global food supply also plays a role in determining the design of animal production systems.

Animal research and animal welfare

Animal research has resulted in life-saving techniques and treatments for both humans and animals. The responsible use of animals in research is guided by the “3 R’s:” replacement, reduction, and refinement. All proposed uses of animals in research are reviewed before the research is begun to make sure that they are scientifically and ethically justified. The first R, replacement, involves evaluating the research to determine if the use of animals can be avoided altogether. Reduction refers to minimizing the number of animals necessary while making sure the research results will still be valid. Refinement refers to methods used to alleviate or minimize pain and distress, such as the use of anesthesia and medications to relieve pain.

Researchers are constantly evaluating alternative methods that do not use animals and will provide the same high-quality results. Although animal tests continue to be replaced by alternative methods, there are still many that can not be replaced; until suitable and comparable alternatives can be found, all research that uses animals is subject to strict evaluation.

Veterinarians and animal welfare

Veterinarians provide the foundation for animal welfare by conducting animal welfare research; preserving the health of animals; providing guidance on housing, nutrition, humane handling, and management; and, when necessary, providing humane euthanasia. Sound knowledge of animal physiology and behavior gives veterinarians a unique perspective and allows them to assess animal care and use systems in their entirety, balancing science and ethics to protect animal welfare in the context of societal values.
“Cut and dried” is for firewood, not animal welfare

Often, opponents of animal management practices attempt to discredit those practices by oversimplifying it and making it seem very black-and-white. In reality, the accurate assessment of animal welfare involves balancing all aspects of an animal care system utilizing more than one measurement technique for animal welfare. In general, answering animal welfare questions involve trade-offs. For example, changes made to improve the behavioral aspects of animal welfare may result in detriments to the health aspects of animal welfare. Every system should be constantly studied and assessed for opportunities for improvement but the totality of animal welfare must be assessed to avoid unintended negative consequences on other measurements of animal welfare.

When evaluating animal management practices, it is critical to base the evaluation on animal needs, not human needs. For example, an inexperienced person may look at an animal care system and decide the animals do not have enough space based on that person's assessment that they would not be happy in that amount of space; in reality, however, excess space may actually be bad for the animals under certain circumstances.

How can you help?

✧ Don’t fall for the 30-second sound bite, even when it sounds like an obvious position.

✧ Seek out additional information, including that on the AVMA Web site at www.avma.org.

✧ Students can serve on relevant AVMA committees to help shape AVMA policy and actions.

✧ Look for opportunities to participate in learning experiences, such as the Animal Welfare Intercollegiate Judging/Assessment Contest (a joint effort between Michigan State University Animal Behavior and Welfare Group and AVMA).

✧ Opportunities also exist for an animal welfare externship at AVMA headquarters in Schaumburg, Illinois.

For more information on the AVMA’s animal welfare policies, go to www.avma.org/issues/animal_welfare/policies.asp.