

IS EDUCATION THE ANSWER TO IMPROVING FARM ANIMAL WELFARE?

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INTRODUCTION

The question 'Is education the answer to improving farm animal welfare?', is extremely important and one that requires deep thinking and consideration of many aspects relating to a whole range of issues including creating awareness, stimulating and maintaining motivation, program technical content, accessibility, affordability, credibility and practicality.

Education is very much a two way process and although it might be relatively easy to develop training programs with the appropriate content and instructors, investment in potential participants is also critical, particularly in terms of attitudes and behaviour. Helping to change attitudes is the first step, but then motivating people to act upon those attitudes is also paramount. In most cases, the attitudinal change required is related more to a cultural change regarding adoption of new and different practices. However, for some working in agriculture, providing opportunities to enable an understanding about animal behaviour and the negative impact of some human behaviours is a fundamental necessity. Changes in agricultural practice are not easily achieved, even for those that have proven productivity benefits. For welfare improvements, the challenge is even greater where additional costs are likely to be involved without guarantee of increased returns.

Society's notion of animal welfare is changing from a 'prevention of cruelty' approach to 'meeting the needs of animals'. However, unless the agricultural sector's understanding of this new concept of animal welfare is raised in parallel with the community's, then this disparity will lead to possible resentment and disengagement.

In terms of industry and farm animal welfare, the real challenges are to find ways to create awareness, motivate and to inspire to achieve improvements in current practices but also to go a step further and enhance welfare overall. The other challenge is for the industry to meet expectations with regard to the degree and rate of change that can be both overwhelming and seemingly impossible. However, incremental changes are more likely to be achieved and pursued to enable long-term sustainable improvements. It is essential to

engage with receptive people in the industry so that they are involved in the process from the concept stage.

DEFINING ANIMAL WELFARE

Animal welfare means different things to different people, across the spectrum. In terms of contemporary society thinking, animal welfare means much more than just preventing cruelty. In terms of the agricultural industry, there remains a notion that maintaining good welfare is essentially limited to not being cruel to animals. To change this perspective, it is critical that a common understanding of what animal welfare means, needs to be agreed to by all involved, and that a good starting point would be to promote important ideals such as the Five Freedoms (Brambell Report, 1965).

ATTITUDES REGARDING WELFARE

There are several factors which influence or shape attitudes of people in the agricultural sector including;

- Tradition
- Economics
- Practical imperatives
- Lack of accountability
- Public opinion
- Lack of opportunities for improvement

Tradition

Tradition, convention or conservatism can create obstacles, particularly in relation to the younger generation wishing to make changes, as they are often limited in their ability to be able to make decisions whilst older family members are still active as the farm manager. In addition, many farm practices are 'handed down' from generation to generation, often without question. This aspect is changing as young farmers seek further studies or travel where they have the opportunity to learn from other people and to become aware of alternatives.

Economics

Following World War II, there was a major shift from small family owned farms to large, corporate based intensive production systems. This arose from the demand and expectation for cheap, abundant food. Simultaneously, a greater disconnection between producers and consumers due to increasing urbanisation occurred, resulting in a lack of awareness of changes in animal production practices. The search for reducing costs of production and increasing returns was driven by strong economic imperatives.

Farmers today continue to rely on high levels of productivity and unfortunately the general view is that more humane options cost more with no increase in returns. With more welfare research showing positive productivity outcomes and markets paying premiums for 'welfare friendly' products, these aspects are attracting the attention of producers and industry representatives. For example, Grandin (1989) showed that by providing environmental enrichment such as strips of cloth in the pen of young pigs and brief positive contact with handlers, this reduced fighting and the pigs were easier to move thereby increasing efficiency and reducing the risk of bruising.

Practical imperatives

Farming is a very practically based business that relies upon practical solutions. As with a strong economic imperative, practical aspects are a fundamental consideration for producers. When faced with the call to phase or ban a procedure, there is usually an immediate negative reaction unless a viable, effective alternative can be suggested. This is why animal welfare science is so important. Certainly, there are and will be some practices that do need to be eliminated but if a comprehensive evaluation has been undertaken to identify and quantify the key welfare concerns, as well as assess possible alternatives, there is a greater chance that industry will accept the outcome. By supporting industry to help find solutions, where solutions are likely to be found, this will improve their understanding of key welfare issues and provide an assurance that there is a genuine attempt to engage and encourage, rather than judge and blame.

Lack of accountability

The welfare focus on intensive production systems began over 40 years ago through Ruth Harrison's book 'Animal Machines', and has led to pig and poultry producers being aware of the importance of animal welfare. This has led to the development of industry based quality assurance programs, although fundamental changes are still required to address concerns relating to specific aspects inherent within these intensive production systems. However, a

welfare interest by the sheep and cattle industries has only really emerged in the last 10 years in Australia. Accountability can take many forms including legal requirements and quality assurance standards, as well as being an integral part of an industry's overall image. This focus on accountability has led to resentment by some sectors within the industry, whilst the more progressive members are more open to establishing dialogue to discuss welfare issues. Overseas, some major retailers have established welfare standards for suppliers (Fraser, 2006). For example, world recognised UK retailer Marks and Spencer only sell and use in their baking products, eggs that are sourced from certified free range producers

(http://plana.marksandspencer.com/index.php?action=PublicPillarStoryDisplay&pillar_id=3).

Public opinion

Individual attitudes are greatly influenced by whether or not other 'relevant' people are aware of and may have opinions about actions taken. These are known as subjective norms and by influencing attitudes, can influence behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In the past, welfare issues have primarily been promoted by 'animal rights' groups based strongly on philosophical arguments. To most in the agricultural sector, the opinions of such groups do not rank highly. However, in recent times, the focus on animal welfare in farm animal production has been broadened to include 'moderate' animal advocacy groups such as the RSPCA and Compassion in World Farming, as well as the general public and government. In addition, the importance of leadership within industry is critical to anticipate future developments and prepare industry to meet emerging needs and expectations (Fraser, 2002). The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (www.daff.wa.gov.au) is playing a pivotal role in bringing industry representatives from various sectors, including agriculture together to identify key welfare issues and potential solutions.

Lack of opportunities for improvement

In order to achieve real progress, it is essential for farmers to be able to access relevant resources such as improved equipment and training programs promoting new techniques. Being in rural and/or remote areas can pose difficulties in being able to access resources easily. It is encouraging that there is an increasing level of welfare related research being undertaken in Australia as well as key training programs being developed (<http://animalwelfare.net.au/educate/educate.html>).

Another key improvement is that government is investing more resources into animal welfare with the establishment and expansion of dedicated animal welfare units throughout Australia.

The current federal government initiated the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS) for an investment of \$6M from 2005 to 2009. This strategy aims to promote and protect the welfare of all animals in Australia including aquatic species, wild animals, companion animals, farm animals and animals used for scientific purposes, and for work, display and recreation. It is anticipated that this will be achieved through the implementation of high welfare standards across all sectors (AAWS, 2005). Education and training is an integral component of the AAWS.

TYPES OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Educational opportunities exist in many different forms. Farmers access information and acquire new skills in various ways, ranging from formally assessed training programs to computer based decision support tools on the internet.

i) Formal training programs

Many types of formal agricultural related training programs exist. The most obvious is the agricultural college system, which primarily caters for students in the last two years of secondary school having a strong focus on agricultural studies and incorporating a working farm complete with farm animals. Over recent years, there is an increasing trend for agricultural workers to have access to and be assessed through formal training programs. Several courses are mapped to competencies recognised by the Australian Quality Training Framework (www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills). Due to legal requirements in some States, this formal approach began with training in the responsible use of chemicals but has over recent years expanded to include industry based stock handling training and mulesing training (www.kondinin.com.au). In the future, more programs are likely to be offered to many different sectors of the industry including transporters, contractors and saleyard staff. Enabling participants to be recognised for competencies achieved, allows individuals to develop their own career pathway. It also enables the industry to demonstrate that people have been formally assessed rather than just confirmed that they have participated. This links in with codes of practice, where there is a requirement for operators to be skilled in certain procedures (DLGRD, 2003). Achieving competencies provides an assurance that procedures are being undertaken appropriately.

Currently, one of the most significant industry based agricultural training and accreditation programs that has a strong welfare link is, the National Mulesing Accreditation Program. This program is coordinated by the Kondinin Group, an agricultural based and nationally registered training organisation, in collaboration with the Livestock Contractors Association (<http://www.kondinin.com.au/Training/courses/nmap/nmap.asp>). Over the past three years,

over 1000 operators have become accredited, based on nationally recognised competencies. The wool industry's research and development body, Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) invested over \$250,000 in three years to provide the foundation work for this program. This resulted in preparation of a set of national guidelines and competencies, establishment of a team of State-based trainers, and production of recognised training materials including a training manual and assessment tools. Despite the industry's commitment to phase out mulesing in 2010, this program has improved welfare relating to mulesing in the short term as well as the potential for it to be used as a model for the development of other training programs, especially in relation to specific husbandry procedures.

Other examples of formal training programs are those offered through industry organisations such as the National Centre for Dairy Education Australia (www.ncdea.edu.au) and cooperative research centres (CRC) for various species including poultry and sheep. Another important formal training program is Stockplan® developed by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries with funding from AWI (http://www.wool.com.au/Environment/Stock_Wise/StockPlan/page_2073.aspx).

Stockplan® training provides farmers with the confidence and knowledge to prepare for and respond quickly to drought conditions to minimise economic and welfare risks occurring.

Over the past 2-3 years, there has been a strong training focus on using humane handling methods. Programs such as Low Stress Stockhandling® (www.lss.net.au) and ProHand (www.animalwelfare.net.au) emphasise the importance of the attitude of handlers and the need to work with, not against the natural behaviour of animals. ProHand was developed by the Animal Welfare Science Centre (AWSC) in Melbourne. The AWSC is a collaboration between the Victorian Department of Primary Industry, University of Melbourne and Monash University. ProHand is a multimedia package and to date, two different modules have been developed; one for dairy and one for pigs. A new module is also being developed for abattoir workers. It requires a facilitator to assist participants to use the training package but does not involve practical handling of animals during the actual training session. Evaluation of the program has shown very positive improvements in attitude and animal handling technique, as well as a reduction in fear levels of animals and significant productivity benefits (Hemsworth, 2007). ProHand is science based and validated and has recently been mapped to national competencies (pers comm. Jeremy Skuse, AWSC). Conversely, Low Stress Stockhandling® is not science based or validated, although it has been mapped to national competencies. Anecdotal reports from participants undertaking low stress stock handling training have been very positive.

ii) Informal training

Informal training is a more common form of training compared to formal programs. Throughout Australia, many farmers regularly attend informal workshops that are not competency based but where substantial practical information is offered. In Western Australia, many farmer workshops have been conducted over the past several years which enable participants to gain a good understanding and skills to undertake faecal egg counting for managing worm burdens in sheep. To date, welfare related topics, have had limited exposure but this is changing. One exception is creating opportunities for farmers to gain skills in condition scoring sheep and assessing pasture feed availability through the 'Sheep's Back' program which is funded by AWI (www.woolinnovation.com.au/Education/AWI_grower_networks). These are two essential skills for improved productivity but vital during periods of drought to avoid under-nutrition of sheep. Western Australia has experienced dry seasons in the last few years and several initiatives are being developed to improve farmer access to information and resources to allow better preparation for drought situations.

iii) Field days and seminars

It is encouraging that industry and welfare groups are organising more opportunities for people to interact and discuss welfare related issues. These are generally held in larger urban centres rather than rural towns. By incorporating welfare topics in general agricultural events in regional centres, more producers will be exposed to key issues. This approach will have a greater impact rather than attempting to host a whole program on animal welfare. In Western Australia, the WA Department of Agriculture and Food has over recent years included a current welfare topic at major events such as Wagin Woolarama and Dowerin Field Days, including livestock transport and codes of practice. In addition, welfare has featured as part of the annual 'Livestock Updates' over the past few years (Evans, 2005).

iv) Self-assessment guides and tools

Self assessment guides are useful resource tools for producers to review and compare their practices and standards to a recognised benchmark. The process helps to focus on aspects that impact on welfare and to identify areas for improvement. Currently, there are few self-assessment guides available in Australia except perhaps through formal quality assurance programs where producers need to undertake an internal audit. Greater access to such tools in the future is likely to encourage greater awareness of welfare standards and linkages with individual enterprises.

v) *Publications*

Transportation

The '*Is it Fit to Load Guide*', which is a pocket size guide describing conditions which render animals unfit for transport to enable producers to better select stock for transport, was jointly developed by the RSPCA (WA), WA Department of Agriculture and Food, and the WA Department of Local Government and Regional Development in collaboration with industry. The success of this publication was not just the guide itself but also the process that was used to develop it. The first stage was to engage relevant sectors of the industry, including transporters, saleyard staff, stock agents and producers to allow direct input into the guide through a facilitated meeting. This helped to ensure that the proposed parameters and limits were acceptable to the industry, which in turn would enable rapid endorsement and adoption. By providing an overview of the key welfare concerns as an introduction to the meeting, this established clear agreement of the five parameters that needed to be addressed including blindness, condition (disease/injury), general vigour, weight bearing ability (i.e. able to stand on all four legs) and pregnancy status. Western Australia produced two editions of the guide, the first of which was partly funded by government and industry. Following this, Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) used the concept to develop a national guide (MLA, 2006). So with a little bit of seeding money, small initiatives can provide industry with the confidence to take it further.

Surgical husbandry procedures

Earlier this year, Meat and Livestock Australia released a new publication focussing on branding, castration and dehorning in cattle (MLA, 2007). An encouraging aspect of this publication is that it supports using polled breeds to avoid the need to de-horn cattle. Polled breeds have been actively promoted by welfare groups and research has shown little or no difference in production traits between horned and polled bulls (Stookey & Goonewardene, 1996). With industry now openly supporting polled breeds, progress towards a future without de-horning may occur sooner than previously anticipated.

SUCCESS FACTORS

For educational activities to have the greatest chance of success, the following factors should be considered.

i) Industry support

By engaging industry early in the concept development of an educational initiative, it is more likely to be endorsed and adopted. The other advantage of this is that industry may also contribute funds. It also encourages recognition of, and responsibility and commitment to improving animal welfare. The Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) is responsible for coordinating the WA Livestock Welfare Reference Group which was established by a joint initiative between industry, DAFWA and the WA Department of Local Government and Regional Development. Its aim is to provide a forum for identifying, discussing and resolving key welfare issues in agriculture. To date, the group has been instrumental in piloting a stock handling program for stevedores and feedlot operators in the live export industry and developing a set of guidelines for long haulage transport.

ii) Relevance to industry

Industry change is more likely if suggested approaches to improve welfare standards are relevant and practical. Calls to ban or modify practices without consideration of the resulting consequences and/or suggestions to minimise potential impacts are less likely to receive a positive response. Good progress can be made by supporting industry to develop solutions.

iii) Credibility

One of the most important aspects of any training program is that it has credibility with the industry. And the way to achieve this is to ensure that the trainers have good industry knowledge, and exceptional technical and mentoring skills. Finding and utilising individuals with these attributes is a major challenge. Two different approaches can be used to establish trainer capacity – select from those who either have an agricultural education background or a strong technical background. My preference is the latter, whereby producers, contractors or transporters who have sound technical skills and an affinity to teach can be given additional support and resources in which to shape attitudes and transfer knowledge.

iv) Access

Creating opportunities for people to access training easily will result in faster and more widespread adoption. By minimising travel time and expenses to attend training, producers and agricultural sector workers are more likely to participate. In addition, providing training on a farm to create the right context for the training to be conducted is also important. The major disadvantage to this is the high cost involved in delivering programs remotely as trainer travel expenses need to be covered.

v) Training subsidies

In 2006, DAFWA offered a \$200 subsidy to each person who undertook mulesing accreditation as a way to increase the number of accredited operators quickly. This was very successful with all workshops fully attended and over 150 people accredited that year. The flow-on effect was that the Bayer chemical company offered a subsidy in 2007. Another example of a training subsidy offered is the Live Export Stock handling Training Program, where LiveCorp provides a \$250 subsidy to each participant to attend. By the end of this year, two workshops would have been held in Perth, with more planned for WA and interstate.

vi) Agricultural colleges

The ongoing success to improve farm animal welfare is very dependent on ensuring that future farmers are provided with opportunities to have sound practices. Agricultural colleges need to be able to access good resource materials for teaching, practical alternative options and professional development opportunities for staff. In Western Australia, nearly all agricultural colleges have converted from caged layer systems to barn laid or free range. In 2006, the WA School Animal Ethics Committee instructed all colleges to prohibit students from doing the mules operation as it couldn't be justified given that it was being phased out. Plans are also underway for DAFWA to work with colleges to implement stock handling training based on improving attitudes and behaviour in the near future. Because stock handling training can greatly improve attitudes towards animals, it provides a valuable platform in raising awareness and understanding of animal welfare generally and as such can have a profound impact on improving animal management and husbandry.

CONCLUSION

Education has an essential role in improving animal welfare. However, the development and implementation of welfare related training requires considerable planning, engagement, discussion, evaluation and resourcing. Government has a vital role to play in facilitating this process and has worked closely with industry to initiate effective educational activities. But there is much more to do.

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Q – Delegate:

I'm a veterinarian and a beef producer here in Queensland, and I also export cattle and run two feed lots in the Philippines.

There's been a real revolution in managing beef production in the north, but right across Australia in the last 10 years. And one of the unheralded drivers in that has been – and this is many steps removed – the consumer. Not the consumer looking for overt changes in animal welfare, but the consumer looking for better quality product. And with the advent of Meat Standards Australia, within 12 months, we had this sway, the Bud Williams Low-Stress Stock (LSS) Handling Schools across Australia. They just took off like wildfire, because we were being rewarded for delivering cattle to the meatworks with good glycogen levels, no dark cutters, good quality meat, and it really has changed the way that we all work cattle.

So, standing up and criticising and misinforming – presenting misinformation – will do nothing to encourage beef producers or sheep producers to come on board. Working within the commercial context, working within the practical and technical constraints that we face is the only way that we can make this work across the board. It's not a question, it's a comment and it's a plea.

Certainly the profitability and productivity aspect is increasingly relevant and I mentioned earlier the research that's showing the linkages there too. But I still believe that the agricultural production sector needs to acknowledge that the consumer is also asking questions about HOW animals are treated – so that's a separate issue. Quality is linked to welfare, as we know, particularly with transportation. But, if you look at overseas, where consumer demand is making a difference to the way animals are reared and housed, for example with the percentage of free-range eggs purchased and so on, you will see that people are going to make ethical choices about what they eat. It hasn't hit Australia yet, but it will.

Q – Delegate:

That's a very good comment. But while Di's presentation was going on, I was thinking also about the partnership approach. We need to work together. We all have animal welfare at heart. As a teacher using resources, I'm far more inclined to pick up a resource that has been endorsed by a number of parties and industry as well, rather than being one minority group. I really think that we need to just strip it back, look at the common elements that we all have, and work from there. Because, like I said, in teaching, I would naturally go to a resource that I can see is endorsed by a number of different parties.

Q – Delegate:

Can you give us some advice on how to handle the challenge of the fact that the model Codes of Practice for most of the farm animals are not actually legally enforceable, i.e., the minimal animal welfare standards are not legally enforceable. So, there's a little bit of an issue with actually motivating industry to follow those, because they can be used as a defence as a charge of cruelty as well and it's quite an issue. How do we deal with that?

One of the things that I'm very aware of, and certainly have concerns about, is just teaching codes of practice. To me, that doesn't bring in the attitudinal changes. And so, if I had my way, LSS – or equivalent programs – would be absolutely mandatory for anyone involved in the livestock industries. That's what we need to bring about long-lasting attitudinal change. It's not about what's in the codes, because if you have a positive attitude towards animals, everything else follows. That's the

fundamental part of it. Because once people engage and they find different and better ways, it really does. So, even though laws and legislation have a role, I'm more passionate about the educational approach.

The other thing that's happening that I'm not sure that you're aware of is that all the Codes of Practice are being replaced by Standards and Guidelines. And the first one that's going to come out is transport. It's being debated heavily right now, and I'm sure Animals' Angels will be involved in that, because it's going out for public consultation. And basically, the Standards will be mandatory. They will be law, and the guidelines will be basically Best Practice. Similar, probably, to what the Codes are now in that if you're not complying, you couldn't use it as a defence against a prosecution of cruelty.

Q – Delegate:

You have said “Be careful of your thoughts, they become your attitudes and then they become the practice.”, and I wish to comment on that.

Maybe it will help animals if we started to be careful of our words. They become our attitudes and they become the practice. And I would like to mention the language which we use when we refer to non-humans. If we use the language which describes them, in most cases, as things, not sentient beings, then we actually condone that attitude that we can do whatever we want to do with them.

And I would recommend everybody to read this fantastic book called, “Speciesism”; actually the definition of speciesism is to deny, in thought and in practice, the equal consideration to members of other species.

So instead of using words such as putting animal to “sleep”, we actually should use putting them to “death”. That's the reality. Instead of using the “it”, maybe if we can use “she” or “he”, acknowledging that she or he is a sentient being. Instead of using words like “feral”, maybe we can use “free-living animal” and so on and so on.

Even now, with the livestock, I find this a very disturbing, because we commodify the non-humans there. Maybe we can think of other ways to describe their function in our society. So I would strongly recommend us to be careful with our words, because they become our attitudes, and they become our practice.
