

Time for organics to lead

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The importance of an individual's mental health and psychological wellbeing are recognised as being paramount to the health and performance of human beings. The importance of these criteria, especially relating to the performance of production of animals, is now also acknowledged as being paramount.

I recall being on a Canadian faculty of veterinary medicine curriculum committee in 1971 and asking that an animal behaviourist be invited to the college to give a series of lectures to the students. The request was voted down because the faculty was seen as one where 'science' was taught; animal behaviour was not seen to be a scientific discipline.

Ironically, it has been the work of scientists that has enabled the European Commission (EC) to pass a declaration that animals are sentient beings and European multinational food companies are now able to impose animal welfare standards on their suppliers.

Animal sentience may be talked of in terms of "individuality of farm animals and their ability to choose. It is an acknowledgement that they have feelings and are aware of their emotions related to their sensations" (de Fraga *The Veterinarian*, Nov 2004 p14).

In March more than 600 delegates from 50 nations attended a conference – *From Darwin to Dawkins: the Science and Implications of Animal Sentience* – in London. Interestingly enough, one of the co-sponsors of the conference was the multinational supermarket company Tesco. This UK-based enterprise has recognised that a growing number of customers are wanting to know that the animals providing their meat were ethically reared and in simple language were "happy" animals.

There is a direct link between the welfare, management (husbandry) and health of the animals in our care.

Proceedings of workshops conducted by the Network for Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Agriculture (NAHWOA), sponsored by the EC, have been published in the past few years. In these, speakers from many European countries and internationally recognised universities have worked through the EC organic standards to ensure that the standards take into account this interaction.

A fundamental point made by many speakers is the fact that each species of animals we care for has its own special welfare and management needs and should be allowed the freedom to express some if not all of its own needs.

To remove some, or in some instances all, behavioural opportunities must be stressful to the animals because they are no longer able to choose their "natural" activities.

Stress is an animal welfare, husbandry and, subsequently, a health issue that may then significantly affect production. The impact of stress on farm animals has been noted by many workers. These are just two such examples:

Researchers tell me it is impossible to accurately quantify

meat tenderness because there are too many variables. These include how the animals are mustered (whether using dogs, planes, or vehicles); how the animals are held before transport; how animals are loaded (whether a dog or an electric prod is used); how the animals are transported and the distance over which this occurs; and how the animals are housed at the abattoirs before slaughter. Organic standards tend to cover only the hygiene of the transport and not the details to cover any or all of the above. Why not?

A veterinarian working for a large cattle operation in northern Australia has told me that bulls under her care are infertile for up to six weeks from "transport stress" after having been carted from one property to the next.

The New Zealand Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries (NZ.MAF) has a director of animal welfare. Do any of our state departments of agriculture have such a post?

Massey University (NZ) has an animal welfare science and bioethics centre. Do any of our universities have such a centre?

Researchers are required to submit all proposed work with animals to an ethics committee before beginning the research project. Vets and farmers are not required to submit to an ethics committee any proposal for the use of animals (such as the establishment of a new feedlot, or a new intense housing of pigs or poultry) or for the use of any allopathic¹ or homeopathic² therapy (where the cost/benefit to the animal's welfare has not been established).

There is an urgent need to establish the efficacy of many homeopathic remedies. Many of these products are allowable inputs on organic farms without the need of the "manufacturer" demonstrating efficacy and possible sequelae. The lack of data on their efficacy has been recognised by the EC and efforts are now being made to review and research this issue in Europe.

Animal "rights" are topical issues, with such procedures as: mulesing in sheep; tail docking in dogs; intensive housing of chickens, cattle, sheep, and pigs; and the live sheep and cattle export trade. The definition of "free range" needs review with respect to chickens and pigs.

What is the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS, our national certifier) and the independent certifying bodies doing to improve the welfare of livestock on organic farms in this country?

Is now the time for the organic industry to be the opinion leader and develop acceptable standards for animal sentience and animal welfare on organic farms such that Australian consumers can be confident that all such animals are ethically reared as "happy animals" like their UK cousins? ■

1. Allopathy: treatment of disease by usual means; ie, by inducing an opposite condition.
2. Homeopathy: treatment of disease by drugs (usually in minute doses) that in a healthy person (*read animal*) would produce symptoms (*read signs*) like those of the disease; *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*.