



Animal Welfare Concepts: Applications to Dogs

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Introduction

Animal welfare can present a complex, contentious challenge for many types of animal care and use scenarios. While the care and welfare of animals used for production of food often receives significant media coverage in the U.S. and abroad, similar concerns about treatment extend to animals maintained for other purposes, such as research, teaching, sport/entertainment and companionship. Although the ultimate purpose for which dogs are intended may differ, their basic welfare needs will generally tend to be similar and must be well understood in order to be met.

What is animal welfare?

Different definitions exist for the term “animal welfare.” One of the most well established definitions states that animal welfare is the state of the animal in regard to its attempts to cope with its environment (Broom, 1986). More recently the World

Organization for Animal Health has defined animal welfare as “how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. An animal is in a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behavior, and it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress. Good animal welfare requires disease prevention and appropriate veterinary treatment, shelter, management and nutrition, humane handling and humane slaughter or killing.” (OIE, 2012).

Some use “animal welfare” and “rights” interchangeably, but the terms are not the same. “Animal rights” refers to a philosophical view of the moral status of animals that indicates whether, and under which conditions, animal use is acceptable, and which moral criteria are relevant in making such decisions. In contrast, “welfare” refers to the state of the animal or the quality of life the animal experiences.



Basis for animal welfare considerations: the Five Freedoms for Animals

Almost all modern policies and considerations pertaining to animal welfare have been informed to some extent or incorporate some aspects of what are now widely known as the Five Freedoms for Animals. In response to social concerns about agricultural animal treatment that was widespread in the UK around the 1960s, the UK government appointed a technical committee to “Examine conditions of livestock kept in intensive husbandry systems, advise about whether standards should be set in the interests of their welfare, and what the standards should be.” The 1965 report of the Brambell Committee (Brambell, 1965) subsequently set forth the following ideal states for animals that provide a basis against which to consider animal welfare:

1. Freedom from hunger, thirst and malnutrition. By access to fresh food and water, diet balanced to maintain full health.
2. Freedom from pain, injury and disease. By prevention and/or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
3. Freedom from discomfort. By providing an appropriate environment.
4. Freedom from fear and distress. By ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid psychological suffering.
5. Freedom to express normal behavior. By providing sufficient space, proper facilities, social interaction.

How is animal welfare assessed?

Assessment of the overall welfare of groups of animals is often done in an effort to gauge the quality and appropriateness of a facility’s care and management practices, but it is vital to note the importance of assessing welfare at the individual animal level. Further, how well an animal is doing (in other words, the animal’s state of being) may vary across a continuum that can range from very good to very poor. This status may differ between individual animals and can change within an animal as a function of various factors, such as the animal’s stage of life or reproductive status, age, season, or nutritional status.

There are three general conceptions of animal welfare (Fraser et al., 1997) — that animals should feel well, function well and be able to lead reasonably natural lives. The feelings conception of animal welfare captures the idea that animals should experience positive emotional states (pleasure, contentment) and minimally experience negative ones (fear, boredom or frustration). The functioning conception reflects the idea that animals should be healthy, and able to grow and maintain normal physical,



physiological and behavioral function. The natural living conception indicates that animals should be able to lead “reasonably natural lives” through development and use of species-typical adaptations and capabilities. In addition, whenever feasible, natural elements should be incorporated into animals’ living spaces.

While none of the three conceptions by themselves can fully characterize animal welfare, an integrated approach that incorporates all three may allow us the most accurate sense of how well an animal is doing or coping in a given environment.

Applications to dogs

Applying these basic concepts of animal welfare can help to ensure that caretakers continually improve a dog’s quality of life.

Dogs that feel well should indicate positive emotional states. For example, do the animals more often than not indicate by their behavior that they are relaxed, calm or playful, or is there evidence of ongoing fear, boredom (unresponsiveness), frustration or pain?

To determine if a dog is functioning well may require focusing on aspects such as the dog’s overall health. Signs of illness — vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, sneezing, ocular and nasal discharge, injury, lameness, etc. — are useful indicators of physical well-being status, as are body condition, coat quality, growth, and litter size and quality (if, for example, she is a breeding female).

Are the dog's behavioral systems functioning appropriately? Evidence might be found by examining whether the dog is able to show normal patterns of behavior and adaptation to its environment. Evaluating the extent to which the dog is permitted opportunities for reasonable aspects of natural living might involve considering whether she is able to socialize with other dogs as well as people, and whether he has access to fresh air, the outdoors and the ability to socialize with other animals (dogs and people) in normal ways.

In short, when assessing animal welfare, it is critical to pay attention to both the physical and behavioral indicators of the animal's status. Neither category alone is sufficient to accurately gauge dog welfare. It is not enough to focus solely on whether a dog is physically healthy. Mental and behavioral health are also critical for dogs to function well as good, safe companions and as partners in the human-animal bond. In addition to health, caretakers must consider factors such as whether dogs can exercise (run, swim), dig, bark, and chew. The extent to which dogs show evidence of stereotypic behaviors that may indicate trouble coping with their environments, such as pacing, circling, or wall-bouncing, must also be evaluated. Incorporating multiple aspects of welfare in this manner may help to ensure that dogs' needs are comprehensively addressed, regardless of their environments.

References

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