

Summary and conclusions

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This is a highly personal view of the proceedings of the meeting. I shall not attempt to summarize the individual papers, if only because the authors have more than adequately done so themselves. Instead, I shall concentrate on drawing together some general themes that emerged from the discussions of a very heterogeneous audience, comprising as it did representatives of welfare organizations, the agricultural and allied industries, research and advisory organizations and finally, a sprinkling of people whose rôle in animal welfare is best described as administrative. Given such a potential diversity of viewpoints, it is perhaps remarkable that considerable unanimity was achieved on a number of topics.

It was generally agreed that much has already been achieved in areas of animal welfare. There is a much greater awareness of welfare issues, among producers and consumers alike, than was the case even a decade ago. It was also to be noted that in general, there is now much better communication between the welfare lobbies and the livestock industry. While the industry could claim, with some justification, that it has always been pro-welfare, it is anxious to improve its practices and welcomes constructive comment. If nothing more, industry is fully aware of the commercial implications of welfare issues, and is very intolerant of any malpractices that damage its image. All this emerged very clearly from the meeting and is the context in which much of the discussion is to be interpreted.

It was strongly asserted by more than one speaker, and never seriously disputed, that while improved welfare is technically feasible, it can seldom be done without incurring additional costs. These costs inevitably feed through to the consumer and it was suggested by some speakers that an increasing proportion of consumers is increasingly willing to pay more for welfare-friendly products. There are some encouraging suggestions that this may be so, to some extent, but in my view, the case was not fully made. The data are very difficult to obtain and even more difficult to interpret rigorously. What people say they would pay and what they actually choose to

pay, given a choice, are far from perfectly correlated. Also, several branded animal products incorporate welfare friendliness but whether consumers buy these because of the welfare or whether they are persuaded by other features of the brand — labelling, packaging, reliability — is not always clear. These are only examples from a complex array of factors that determine consumer choices but there is doubt in my mind that the willingness-to-pay claim has not yet been resolved. I do not know for sure, but I suspect, that sales of paté de foie gras have not declined much as awareness of welfare issues have increased.

In any case, we have a problem about increasing the price of food. It may not matter, or matter very much, to well paid people in employment. But it could matter a great deal to people on income support. Cheap food has been one feature of agricultural policy in the United Kingdom (UK) since World War II. Agricultural systems have evolved to be what they are in order to put the most competitively priced product on the market. It therefore follows inexorably that any change to the system, for welfare or other purposes, is almost bound to put up the price. Animal welfare, in common with the whole range of environmental issues that engage our attention, tend to be the luxuries of a well fed, affluent society. In parts of the world where there are intolerable levels of infant and child mortality, people seem to worry less about the welfare of their domestic livestock. We need not approve of their attitude but we can still view it with some compassion

While the willingness-to-pay issue was not resolved at the meeting, it will over time inevitably resolve itself. On one point, there was complete agreement: it would be totally wrong to direct welfare-friendly products at a niche market. That would contravene the principle that improved welfare of farm animals is a necessary goal in its own right. It would be unethical to relegate it to a marketing ploy to develop high-priced products; it must develop on a wider base and for its own sake. The point was also made, and accepted with sympathy, that the current

(September 1998) financial plight of the livestock industry had potentially disastrous consequences for animal welfare. You cannot have good stockmanship if you have no stockmen to carry it out.

While these and many other aspects of welfare were vented at the meeting, its main theme was: who writes the rules? On this, there was virtual agreement: the consumer does. The ways in which the consumer does this are varied, and the individual papers go into different aspects. There are two main avenues by which the consumer directly and indirectly sets welfare standards: (i) via the legislators, for whom consumers vote (or not), and (ii) via the retailers, whom they keep in business (or not).

Consumers, in total form what we call society and there is no member of that society who does not consume. While individuals select what precisely they will consume, more generally society at large decides what is acceptable or unacceptable. Governments and politicians, in framing legislation, will react to the wishes of the electorate. They may offer leadership or guidance but they tend to be less proactive in many areas than they would sometimes have us believe, especially as elections are approached. Animal welfare is no exception; governments reflect the will of society. That said, it is not always an easy task for them to interpret what society wants. In the UK they are formally advised on welfare matters by the Farm Animal Welfare Council. This is an independent, broad-based body that seeks a comprehensive and balanced view of welfare, which usually forms the basis of government's further thinking on the matter. Other bodies can also influence government action, not least producer organizations and the welfare lobbies. As mentioned earlier, there is an increasing willingness by the producers and the welfarists to work in tandem. However, probably the most important influence on government, among all the advice and consultation, is the will of the electorate. The consumers will, in the end, decide what legislation is necessary and acceptable.

Government legislation is all very well, but as pointed out clearly by two speakers, there are increasing difficulties about harmonizing UK legislation with those of the European Union (EU) and World Trade Organization (WTO). The thinking on animal welfare may be converging among members of the EU, though there may still be some way to go. However, WTO regulations may open up trade with countries whose welfare standards fall short of local aspirations. As things stand, this problem is insoluble, except in so far as the consumer, again, may exercise influence through the

retail sector. But this would require the consumer to be informed about welfare standards throughout the world and then act on them. This does not seem to be a realistic prospect.

Nearer home, the consumer can have enormous influence through the retailers, and that is undoubtedly the most direct way of setting the rules on welfare. Veal crates were banned largely through consumer resistance of the product. The sale of free-range eggs is said to be increasing, albeit slowly. And there has certainly been an increase in the labelling of animal products that imply improved welfare, e.g. 'outdoor pork'. These trends will continue, though the standards may be set by consumers prepared to discriminate on perceptions of welfare, rather than on any detailed knowledge of the means of production.

An interesting point of view was expressed during one of the discussions of the rôle of the consumer. When buying a washing machine or a cotton garment, the purchase is made on grounds of affordability and value for money. The consumer does not worry whether the article was produced under conditions of sweated labour, or child labour, or in defiance of health and safety at work. And so, the argument ran, it should be with food products; the consumer should be able to assume that welfare standards were up to scratch, as enshrined in legislation and adequately monitored by whoever. While this view has merit in a local context, it only underscores the difficulty of applying local standards world-wide.

Although well over half of those attending the meeting were scientists, it was interesting to note the general agreement, even among the scientists themselves, that scientists could not and should not write the rules. There are reasons for this, not least that the science itself is seldom precise enough to be definitive. But more importantly, everyone accepted that the decisions on welfare must reside with society at large. The scientists have an important rôle in supplying information and in seeking a better understanding of the issues involved and in suggesting solutions. But beyond that, they simply wear a consumer hat, like everyone else. The issues go beyond, often well beyond, the domain of science.

It goes without saying that any rules must be enforced, if they are to be of any use. This means monitoring, often difficult and always expensive. And if anyone breaks the rules there must be effective sanctions. There are in place, and have been for a long time, legal sanctions with severe penalties for some offences. These laws undoubtedly are

effective but the fact that we can still read about serious offences, from time to time, illustrates the difficulty of enforcement. While legal sanctions are the most reassuring, we need not dismiss the power of self-regulation, if exercised properly. To kick someone out of the club, if he misbehaves, can be a very effective sanction. But the will must be there to use it, if need be.

In summary, my impressions of the main points to emerge from the meeting were as follows. (a) The consumer, quite properly, writes the rules, with various bodies helping. (b) Much has already been achieved, both in terms of scientific rigour and the adoption by industry of improved welfare practices. (c) Further improvements will doubtless be achieved; we are in fact unlikely to reach a steady state where

no one wants more welfare. (d) There is a remarkable and widespread desire by industry to continue to improve welfare standards.

While the general picture is therefore encouraging, there are still difficulties. (e) There are problems, not fully addressed at this meeting, about the methods and the costs of effective monitoring, and about the application of proper sanctions should the need arise. (f) There is the much bigger problem of international acceptance of common standards; if any country rejects a food product on welfare grounds, it is no solution to export bad welfare to more distant areas where the consumer has little influence and no control, and probably little knowledge of the conditions under which imported foods are produced.