Equine Welfare—A European Perspective

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We face the same threats to equine health and welfare, and to our industries, from largely the same sources and with the same solutions in Europe as in North America. Identification of horses is the key issue that underpins all considerations of horse health and welfare—disease surveillance, medicines usage, humane disposal, ensuring responsible ownership, etc. Effective communication between stakeholder groups is the key component of any strategy to address problems. Authors’ address: Veterinary Sciences Centre, School of Agriculture, Food Science and Veterinary Medicine, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland; e-mail: Joe.Collins@ucd.ie. © 2010 AAEP.

1. Introduction

In practice, animal welfare standards are determined by the prevailing attitudes, practices, and structures within the industry against the background of relevant legislation and public consciousness of animal welfare. In Ireland, the authors have reported both on this background1 as well as specifically on how deficiencies in the legal framework limit its value in safeguarding equine welfare.2 Recent developments in the United Kingdom3 and The Netherlands4 have also been reviewed with special regard to how a cooperative approach between government and industry has been pursued as the appropriate model.

As part of a 3-yr PhD project, multiple visits were conducted to collect quantitative data regarding the production, keeping, and disposal of horses. It was also recognized, however, that a qualitative approach was simultaneously required—to gather views, opinions, and perceptions, to raise awareness of the importance of engaging with equine welfare, and to promote inclusive rather than imposed solutions to the threats identified. This work took the form of the following:

- a web-based interactive survey of stakeholder views,5,6
- recorded semi-structured interviews with key members of equestrian bodies, government, and animal welfare charities,
- focus groups with members of the Traveller community—an ethnically distinct, socially disadvantaged group with a strong horse culture, and
- a professionally facilitated workshop on equine welfare.a
2. Method

Quantitative

Locations were visited where horses with poor welfare might be viewed:

- horse fairs and sales venues (Fig. 1)
- fun/charity rides and hunt meets
- competition (equestrian and racing) events
- horse farms and horse dealer premises
- Traveller camps
- livery yards and riding schools
- abattoirs and knackeries
- air and ferry ports
- veterinary clinics and hospitals
- animal sanctuaries and rescue centers (Fig. 2)

Qualitative

A three-round Policy Delphi study was first conducted to ascertain the views and experiences of horse welfare in Ireland among relevant groups such as central government, local authority government, equestrian sports and horse racing organizations, and animal welfare charities. A Policy Delphi is an adapted form of the classical Delphi survey method designed to facilitate decision making; consensus is not necessarily the aim, but rather, this method seeks to expose and explore a complete range of opposing views on a complex area. It is a research tool designed to investigate a policy issue and subsequently, contribute to informed decision making.

Forty-four key players from a broad cross-section of industry, government, and charity groups participated. Short stories (vignettes) based on the Five Freedoms illustrating potential horse welfare infringements were presented, and views were sought regarding their acceptability and likely frequency of occurrence. Also presented were lists of potential welfare issues (e.g., breeding practices, horse transport, and training methods), reasons for poor standards (e.g., ignorance or financial gain), and potential solutions (e.g., education, regulation, and incentives). Specific views were finally sought regarding the disposal of horses trade (including the dealing, trading, and transport elements) and welfare of horses at unregulated gatherings (such as fairs, markets, and impromptu rides/drives). The desirability, feasibility, and ways of improving standards were explored.

Eleven recorded semi-structured interviews with key persons, two focus groups, and a workshop involving 31 participants from stakeholder groups were subsequently conducted to explore, in further depth, the reasons for poor welfare and workable solutions based on a knowledge of the drivers of low standards. This research focused on welfare standards for horses during disposal and at unregulated horse gatherings.

3. Results

Quantitative

The standards of horse health and welfare encountered at the events visited will be illustrated. The difficulty in comparing different types of neglect and abuse of horses will be discussed as will the potential mismatch between current practice and legislation requirements.

The movement and disposal of horses was studied in depth. The numbers of horses slaughtered in Ireland at the sole licensed horse-slaughter plant from January 2002 to June 2009 are shown in Table 1. The carcasses are exported for consumption.
abroad. A second facility commenced the slaughter of horses in 2009, a third facility commenced in early 2010, and a fourth has received approval to begin in mid-2010.

It is known that some, but not how many, horses are exported for slaughter in approved UK horse-slaughter facilities. Available data for the number of horses of all types exported from Ireland for all purposes, including slaughter, is shown in Table 2. Provisions of the Tripartite Agreement (governing the movement of horses between Ireland, the United Kingdom, and France) and EU 1/2005 (regarding the welfare of animals in transport) are not observed in all cases.

The key issue that was identified as critical to furthering our knowledge of how we produce, keep, and dispose of horses and how we can better safeguard their health and welfare was horse identification—this is governed by EC 504/2008 (as regards methods for the identification of equidae).

Qualitative
All 44 Delphi survey respondents graded the situations where they felt equine welfare was most likely to be compromised in Ireland, and this information is illustrated in Figure 3.

Respondents ranked the regulation (and its enforcement) highest that they thought was the way to achieve meaningful change in standards of horse welfare. Strong enforcement of practical industry standards and reinforced by financial penalties were seen as necessary tools in dealing with the worst welfare offenses and offenders. Voluntary compliance and acceptance of higher standards through education and training were considered long-term goals to aspire but ineffective in the immediate term.

A prominent theme running through the replies from respondents was that a lack of awareness (or a desire not to know) by some and inadequate enforcement of existing standards by authorities facilitated others (in general, horse dealers) in profiting from operating in a poor welfare (and thus, perceived low-cost) environment. A strong consensus view was expressed that it is highly desirable (but only moderately feasible) that we improve horse welfare standards in both the disposal of horses trade and at unregulated gatherings in Ireland.

The following were specific proposals by respondents in industry, government, and welfare charities:

- Introduce and maintain a comprehensive identification system for horses—this underpins all considerations of horse health and welfare. Improve horse identification in targeted industry sectors where this feature is weak. Provide better enforcement of horse identification at critical control points such as horse fairs and points of export/import.
- Reintroduce a horse-licensing scheme—either for horses generally and/or specifically for stallions, because this could help to fund improvements in horse welfare standards and dissuade untargeted breeding of horses.
- Develop a licensing system and associated “Welfare Code of Practice” that could be implemented at horse gatherings such as fairs and markets.
- Ensure that financial returns from horse production and registration are secured and utilized specifically to fund the humane disposal of horses.
- Develop a single comprehensive conduit for science-based information, education, and training on horse health and welfare for the equine industries using a trusted source.
- Involve “Champions of Welfare” as profile mes-

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**Table 1. Horse Slaughter Numbers for Ireland (for Export for the Human Food Chain)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009 (January to June)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of horses</td>
<td>1,995</td>
<td>2,060</td>
<td>824</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>822</td>
<td>1,486</td>
<td>2,066</td>
<td>1,512</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Fig. 3.** Situations where horse welfare was considered most likely to be compromised in rank order on a scale of 0 = never to 8 = frequently. Median is indicated by a bold bar, 25th and 75th quartiles are indicated by the edges of each box, and 5th and 95th centiles are indicated by the elongated arms.
sengers; the messenger is equally important as the message itself.

- Promote a “welfare scheme;” a cull, in all but name, is needed of horses that have been bred that now are not considered fit for purpose and have no reasonable jobs to do, because they are not considered valuable.

- Adopt a sensitive approach to explaining (to the media and public) the necessity to ensure that unwanted animals are best humanely destroyed, not neglected, abandoned, or required to do jobs for which they are patently unsuitable.

4. Discussion

In the veterinary sciences field, the gathering of quantitative information has historically predominated. There is, however, increasing recognition that, for issues such as animal welfare with a strong social context, this is better informed by the addition of qualitative studies. Such mixed methods have recently been employed in Ireland to identify disease threats in the farming sector (Animal Health Ireland Project) and in the United Kingdom to devise appropriate measures for animal welfare assessment and explore the impact of government policy on animal welfare.

There was a consensus among industry players in Ireland that welfare standards for horses during the disposal process and at ad hoc horse gatherings should be raised, but there was little agreement on how and whether this could be achieved. During the period of this study, the standard of horse health and welfare at unregulated gatherings such as fairs remained at a worryingly low level; however, two new horse slaughter plants have been licensed (and two more are under review), improving the possibility that more unwanted horses might be humanely and responsibly destroyed.

Knowledge exchange is thought to improve the application of research by decision makers. The work reported here focuses on improving lines of communication between stakeholder groups in government, equine industries, and animal welfare charities. Responsible parties must occupy the welfare space; they otherwise leave the debate open to hijack from those who promote a “rights agenda.” Work is ongoing to improve the dissemination of informed, responsible messages regarding the breeding and keeping of horses. There must be an effective veterinary voice (Table 2).

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References and Footnotes


Table 2. Export Figures for Horses From Ireland (Primarily to the United Kingdom) From Belfast, Larne, and Rosslare Ports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Export</td>
<td>9,762</td>
<td>9,975</td>
<td>9,630</td>
<td>9,496</td>
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<tr>
<td>Import</td>
<td>7,288</td>
<td>6,956</td>
<td>5,763</td>
<td>4,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Export</td>
<td>2,474</td>
<td>3,019</td>
<td>3,867</td>
<td>4,813</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures are not available from the Dublin ports, and the numbers moving by air transport are negligible in comparison.