

The Status of Animal Handling Knowledge and Skills in the USA

Our topics for this week are:

- **The evolution of today's animal welfare**
- **Profit motivations for promoting some types of animal welfare**
- **Causes of diminished knowledge and skills of animal handling**

Handlers should become familiar with animals in their care, including their normal habits of eating, drinking, sleeping, urinating, defecating, and exercising so that problems can be identified early and corrected when possible.

Throughout the more than 14,000 years of domesticated animal handling, the benefits of good handling practices for the animal and for the handler were obvious, not only to the handlers but also the observing public. Beginning with the Second Industrial Revolution that began in 1850 and accelerated by the advent of the automobile in the early 1900s, humans have become more detached from working directly with animals. A disconnect has developed between the decision makers, those who actually handle animals, and general society. More than 95% of the U.S. population is three or more generations removed from farm or ranch living.

Commercialization of Animal Handling

To aid in filling the void of animal handling training pertaining to small animals, commercial post-graduate education has marketed Fear Free® (VetFolio, a joint partnership of the North American Veterinary Community and the American Animal Hospital Association) and Cat Friendly® (American Association of Feline Practitioners) training courses and certification of individuals and veterinary practices. Although some of the principles involve the use of synthetic pheromones and nutraceuticals which may or may not be advantageous in decreasing stress, sensitization of veterinarians and veterinary technicians to the possible presence of discomfort and fear in their patients is beneficial in promoting better animal welfare. All renewed emphasis on improved animal handling is desirable. It is unfortunate, however, that veterinary practices which do not elect to join as a member of the copyrighted "Cat Friendly Practices" could be perceived as not being cat friendly, and the copyrighted name "Fear Free Practice" is hyperbole for stress reduction techniques. No veterinary practice is fear free to all patients.

Caveat emptor is Latin for "buyer beware". Some approaches of groups that claim to be advocates of better animal welfare have undisclosed conflicts of interest. This is manifested as

“membership fees”, being certified by the group or a pharmaceutical company without oversight by an independent educational agency or promotion of selected proprietary products, not approved by the Federal Drug Administration. Self proclaimed not-for-profit groups without conflicts of interest which require membership and certification fees and have no business ties to pharmaceutical companies should have transparent financial reports, include their use of surplus income.

Transparency of Animal Handling

Handling animals in seclusion without public visibility by employees or agents of owners fosters an environment that allows the attrition of good animal handling. Several states in the U.S. have passed “ag gag” laws, which intentionally or unintentionally protect handlers of livestock from public scrutiny of inhumane handling of animals. Shielding of animal handling occurs with both livestock and companion animals. Examples include:

- Animal trainers who require appointments for owners to see training practices
- Veterinary hospital personnel who remove dogs and cats from the owners observation to provide non-emergency handling, exams, and treatments
- Close confinement of livestock and poultry that prohibit public observation
- State laws that prohibit photographs of animals in confinement

None of these situations innately cause poor animal handling but they permit and protect environments without transparency to the public that can harbor poor animal handling.

Evolution of Modern Handling of Animals

In the 1940s, the discovery of streptomycin was the first of many antibiotics that allowed the raising of food animals in greater confinement with less risk of communicable disease. In the 1930s chickens were the first to be raised in large-scale extreme confinement. Large feedlots for cattle to be administered growth enhancement drugs became widespread in the 1960s. By 1990, most sows were kept in gestation crates.

The move from small farms to industrial level raising of livestock has exacerbated the desensitization of on-site handlers to how animals are confined and handled. Ironically, raising of animals with low physical and mental stress has repeatedly been shown to result in faster gains in productivity. However, since higher expenses in facilities and labor costs offset some of the gain in productivity, the pressure for extreme confinement persists. However, public knowledge of the disadvantages of raising animals in extreme confinement has grown. Evaluation of the quality of animal handling and restraint is not an exacting science. The best, and only meaningful, source of evidence for good animal handling, restraint, or confinement is what the animal reveals by their behavior when the handling and restraint are repeated or

persists. If the behavior is unnatural (stereotypic or exaggerated fear), poor handling or restraint methods have taken place. Stereotypic behaviors can be caused to exceed random occurrence by excessive confinement and include pacing, weaving, chewing cages or stalls, self-mutilation (feather picking, excessive grooming"), among others. Unnatural behavior as a result of poor handling, restraint, or confinement should be among the primary means of assessing the need for improved management of animals, along with the number of animals demonstrating excessive lameness, external injuries, and vocalizations.

Five Freedoms

Animal welfare is the state of the animal, and how it is coping with the conditions in which it lives. When humans domesticated animals, they took on the responsibilities to provide shelter, food, and a painless death. Fulfilling these responsibilities has been erratic. In the 1700s, animals were not believed to have a soul and therefore did not have feelings. Only the ability to work or produce food or fiber were used as indicators of sufficient welfare. The first law to protect animals from abuse did not exist until 1822; this was the Act to Prevent the Cruel and Improper Treatment of Cattle which was passed in Britain. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was later established in 1866, and in 1915, the Mayo Clinic became the first U.S. institution to have a veterinarian oversee the care of its research animals. In the 1960s, due to pressure for humane handling of production animals stemming from Ruth Harrison's book, "Animal Machines", the British government commissioned the Brambell report on intensive animal production.

In 1965, the Commission listed five freedoms that animals should be ensured. These were:

1. A suitable environment
2. A suitable diet
3. The ability to exhibit normal behavior
4. The need for an animal to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
5. Protection from pain, suffering, injury, and disease

The five freedoms are currently used to assess animal welfare by the World Organization for Animal Health, formally known as the Office International des Epizooties (OIE). In the U.S., provisions for the ability to exhibit normal behavior are not always provided for production animals (livestock and poultry). In some cases, farm animal welfare has been erroneously evaluated by producer groups solely on the criterion of whether the animal grows or produces milk sufficient to meet the producer's expectations.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Production animal welfare should not be evaluated only on whether growth expectations of the managers are met.**
- 2. National standards and independent evaluations of animal welfare based on the "Five Freedoms" are needed in the U.S. for large livestock production operations.**
- 3. Conflicts of interest exist in some sources of animal welfare information that involve certifications that are not evaluated by independent oversight agencies and promotion of certain products with proposed animal welfare benefits that are not FDA approved.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.