Prioritisation of companion dog welfare issues using expert consensus

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Abstract

Resources for tackling animal welfare issues are often limited. Obtaining a consensus of expert opinion on the most pressing issues to address is a valuable approach to try to ensure that resources are wisely spent. In this study, seven independent experts in a range of disciplines (including veterinary medicine, animal behaviour and welfare science and ethics) were consulted on the relative prioritisation of welfare issues impacting companion dogs in Great Britain. Experts first anonymously ranked the priority of 37 welfare issues, pre-defined from a literature review and an earlier published survey. In a subsequent two-day panel workshop, experts refined these issues into 25 composite groups and used specific criteria to agree their relative priorities as a Welfare Problem (WP; incorporating numbers of dogs affected, severity, duration and counter-balancing benefits) and a Strategic Priority (SP; a combination of WP and tractability). Other criteria — anthropogenicity, ethical significance and confidence in the issue-relevant evidence — were also discussed by the panel. Issues that scored highly for both WP and SP were: inappropriate husbandry, lack of owner knowledge, undesirable behaviours, inherited disease, inappropriate socialisation and habituation and conformation-related disorders. Other welfare issues, such as obese and overweight dogs, were judged as being important for welfare (WP) but not strategic priorities (SP), due to the expert-perceived difficulties in their management and resolution. This information can inform decisions on where future resources can most cost-effectively be targeted, to bring about the greatest improvement in companion dog welfare in Great Britain.

Keywords: animal welfare, companion animal, dog, expert, priority, stakeholder

Introduction

Animal welfare is a complex and multi-dimensional construct (Mason & Mendl 1993; Fraser et al 1997) and in recognition of the plethora of welfare issues an individual or a population may encounter, scientists have developed methods to try to assess which issues cause the greatest impairment to animal welfare (eg Scott et al 2003). Identification of priorities in animal welfare follows from the premise that, where the animals’ capacities to suffer can be assumed, the most pressing issues are determined by the severity and duration of suffering and the number of animals affected (Kirkwood et al 1994; Farm Animal Welfare Council [FAWC] 2006). However, such assessments are limited by the availability of empirical evidence, especially where the population is not closely monitored. A number of potential welfare issues for companion dogs have been highlighted within the scientific literature (eg separation anxiety: Schwartz 2003; inherited disease: Asher et al 2009; obesity: Gossellin et al 2007; tail docking: Bennett & Perini 2003) and in media campaigns (eg inherited disease: Rooney et al 2009; dog fighting: BBC News 2009), though the relative importance and impact of each issue — and indeed, of others less well published — is currently unknown. Monitoring companion animal welfare is difficult since the population size and demography is unknown and must be estimated from several data sources (reviewed in Asher et al 2011), and the conditions in which companion animals are kept lack specificity and stability (McGreevy & Bennett 2010). In some cases, media coverage and publicity may amplify the perceived importance of certain welfare issues compared to others where less public discussion or scientific literature is available. Scientific study is often limited by available funding, and the priorities of funding bodies may not necessarily coincide with the current issues affecting populations, or having the greatest welfare impact on individuals.

One way to overcome these difficulties is to utilise the judgements of experts and/or stakeholders who are engaged in scientific research and hold stakeholder community knowledge and direct practical experience of animal welfare topics. This approach has been used in collating information on potential welfare concerns in farm (Whay et al 2003), laboratory (Leach et al 2008) and companion (Houpt et al 2007; Yeates & Main 2011; Buckland et al