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Does the current regulation of assisted reproductive techniques in the UK safeguard animal welfare?

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Abstract

Reproductive medicine is one of the fastest developing fields of veterinary medicine. Regulation of veterinary-assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) is currently divided between the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act (1986), the Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966), and the Animal Welfare Act (2006). None of those pieces of legislation was purpose designed to protect the welfare of animals undergoing ARTs, either directly or by determining which veterinary ART procedures may or may not be performed. Consequently, due to the lack of reference to such procedures, the welfare protection aims of the legislation are sometimes ambiguous. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether the aims of the legislation are being fulfilled but, in the opinion of this author, the legislation is anyway inadequate in scope, most particularly because it fails to provide a reporting function. It is unclear whether all or any veterinary ART procedures being undertaken on post-natal animals are associated with suffering. Some ARTs may cause discomfort, stress or pain: study or review of the welfare effects of these would be valuable. Any future review of the legislation regulating veterinary ARTs, be that an overall review or a review of one of the relevant statutes (for example the VSA), should take into account the interface between research and clinical medicine; the potentially welfare-compromising gaps between the Acts, the need to introduce reporting functions in order to build an evidence base, and the issue of veterinary specialisation and whether specialised techniques should be carried out only by those with specialist post-graduate qualifications.

Keywords: *Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, animal welfare, Animal Welfare Act, assisted reproduction, veterinary specialisation, Veterinary Surgeons Act*