Farm manager involvement in an equine on-farm welfare assessment: opportunities for education and improvement

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Abstract

Previous work surveying equine professionals has suggested ignorance to be a primary cause of poor welfare within the industry, highlighting the importance of improving educational opportunities for industry stakeholders. This may be achieved through on-farm assessments designed to evaluate facilities and share resources with farm owners. While used extensively for evaluating production animal facilities, equine facilities are rarely formally assessed, making it important to determine how well those assessments would be received by equine owners and managers. As part of a larger project, an on-farm equine welfare assessment tool was pilot-tested on a sample of diverse horse farms (n = 26). Farm managers completed a self-assessment to determine their perception of their own farms with respect to animal welfare and then participated in the on-farm assessment process. Post-assessment interviews allowed participants to provide feedback regarding their experience. Farm managers most often underestimated the prevalence of structural issues in their facilities but were more discerning in management-related elements (eg stall cleanliness). Descriptive analysis indicated that farm managers felt that the on-farm assessment tool had the potential to be useful to newcomers to the industry and for a certification programme. Participants also highlighted areas that could make enforcing welfare standards an issue, such as horse and farm ownership. Understanding the perception of on-farm assessments is useful to gauge the potential success of animal care assessment programmes. If well-received, an industry-driven, on-farm welfare assessment has the potential to better educate horse farm managers and, by extension, improve the welfare of the animals under their care.

Keywords: animal welfare, assessment, education, equine, on-farm, stable yard

Introduction

The revision of the National Farm Animal Care Council’s (NFACC) Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Equines (NFACC 2013) brought to light the paucity of information regarding the effect of human management on the welfare status of horses in Canada’s diverse equine industry. Without these farm-level data, it becomes difficult to determine the prevalence of welfare concerns within the industry and, subsequently, develop strategies to reduce or rectify these concerns. A current examination of the opinions and attitudes of Canadian equine professionals suggested that ignorance and lack of knowledge were the major human contributors to poor horse welfare in the Canadian industry and that education was an important way to combat these issues (DuBois et al 2018a). In order to achieve this, educational programmes and opportunities must be accessible for owners and managers and allow for an individualised approach. On-farm welfare assessments may be the solution to this, with the additional benefit of collecting information regarding the welfare status of horses within the Canadian industry.

It is not unusual for on-farm assessments to double as educational opportunities for producers and animal owners (Sørenson & Fraser 2010). Assessors influenced change in management practices in 80% of the farms involved in a research project when feedback was provided with assessments (Sischo et al 1997). A decreased prevalence of lameness and hock injuries in dairy cattle was seen after discussion of numeric results with farmers at an initial assessment (Chapinal et al 2014). Additionally, discussion with farmers about new avenues for veterinary treatments and outcomes (Yeates & Main 2009) can provide a better understanding of pain and illness as welfare-compromising states (Ventura et al 2016).

While this type of information would arguably be very beneficial to horse farm owners and managers, in Canada it is unusual for equine facilities to be formally assessed. Programmes exist in other countries, such as the farm accreditation offered by the British Horse Society (BHS 2018) and the Association of British Riding Schools (ABRS 2018) in the United Kingdom, yet Canadian horse farms are typically naïve to this process. This, in combi-