Attitudes of veterinary students in Croatia toward farm animal welfare

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Abstract

This survey was undertaken to assess the attitudes of Croatian veterinary students regarding farm animal welfare issues. The study included students of all undergraduate years at the only Faculty of Veterinary Medicine in Croatia. First-year students were surveyed twice, ie before and after attending the course on animal welfare, using a written questionnaire containing statements with a five-point Likert scale for choice of answers. Students consider good animal welfare necessary for sustainability of farming systems and food quality and safety, ranking particular issues in the following order: biological functioning > natural living > emotional states. Students also believe that cattle and pigs have greater cognitive abilities and that their welfare is less compromised in comparison with poultry, whereas standard management procedures performed in pig production are perceived as more humane than beak-trimming in poultry. In addition, students tend to consider pain in farm animals caused by management procedures only when these procedures involved the infliction of significant pain. There were no differences between attitude scores on most of the statements from first-year students before and after the course. Furthermore, for the majority of statements, the mean responses were lower in final-year students, suggesting a lower level of empathy toward farm animals. Although similar results have also been recorded elsewhere in the world, these results raise concerns as to the ability of these future veterinarians to promote good farm animal welfare in the country and abroad. The results also suggest a need to modify veterinary student education in Croatia in the field of farm animal welfare.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, Croatia, farm animals, survey, veterinary students

Introduction

Providing good farm animal welfare (FAW), among other issues, has a growing role in the quality of human life. Due to outbreaks of many food-borne diseases, genetically modified food and food products from cloned animals, greater attention is being paid to food quality and safety on the market, while consumers show ever greater interest in food origin and production (Verbeke 2005; EC 2007a; Antunović et al 2014). While poor animal welfare (AW) directly reduces product quality, consumer perception of animal well-being affects it indirectly (Jago et al 2000; Pavičić & Ostović 2013) by equating good AW standards with good food quality standards (Meehan et al 2002; Awuor & Karugu 2014).

To date, Croatian citizens/consumers have participated in only a few surveys of attitudes toward FAW. According to the Eurobarometer survey (EC 2007b), on the 1–10 scale (1: not at all important to 10: very important) they ranked importance of farm animal protection as 7.9 (mean), which is consistent with the mean recorded in the European Union (EU) countries (7.8); yet, more than half of the Croatian consumers surveyed reported that they did not consider FAW when buying meat or meat products (EC 2007c; Cerjak et al 2011). Also, when asked who they believe is the best to ensure that food products are produced in an AW-friendly way, both Croatian and other EU citizens ranked veterinarians second only to farmers as the professionals best positioned to ensure FAW (EC 2007b).

Although treatment of diseases and pain relief in animals remain the primary task of veterinary medicine, the role of veterinarians has assumed some additional, modern aspects. Nowadays, veterinarians have the key role in health protection and implementation of the ‘one-health concept’ which, in the case of farm animals, implies ‘healthy food from healthy animals’ (Blaha & Köfer 2009; Wall 2014). According to this concept, farm-oriented veterinary professionals should be properly qualified in the field of FAW, thus being able to provide consultation to farmers, owners or managers of animal production systems on the most appropriate management practices (Cáceres 2012) and to ensure efficient application of relevant standards, ie meeting the needs of animals kept for production purposes (Edwards & Schneider 2005), whereby education of veterinarians-to-be