

Workshop 4

What does animal sentience mean for animal owners and carers?

Facilitator: Daniella Dos Santos, British Veterinary Association

Animals are used in a huge variety of industries, including farming and food, developing pharmaceuticals (human and veterinary) and entertainment, and also in many areas of the everyday lives of citizens. Animal owners and others involved in the care of animals - including for example the veterinary profession, pet sitters, groomers, animal trainers, professional dog walkers - all have direct impact on the lives of the animals in their care. Whilst some have specialist training in certain aspects of animal care and many have long experience of caring for animals, have the attitudes and behaviours of the animal owning and caring community as a whole kept pace with scientific knowledge on sentience, behaviour and welfare?

Policy makers already implement binding baseline legislation around how animals in different contexts should be treated. However, the nature of the relationship between and owner/carer and the animals under their care means that they are uniquely placed to have huge influence on the lives of those animals and opportunities to go beyond basic legislation in many respects. How can/should individual responsibility influence the broader issues around attitude and behaviour towards animals in everyday life?

Given the scale of the 'communities' and level of direct impact on animals that the beliefs and practices of animal owners and carers can have on animals' lives, and hence on affecting society's approach to treatment of and attitudes towards animals, please discuss the following questions:

Questions:

- 1. At the current time, how well equipped are animal owners and carers to ensure that the needs of the animals in their care are effectively addressed and that they have the necessary understanding of their behaviour to respond appropriately? Should owners also consider the impact - both direct and indirect - of their animals on other sentient animals? Should they consider wider issues, for example choice of breed when buying a puppy and how this might impact on perpetuation of breed-related health problems?**

The general feeling within the group was that there is information available to ensure the needs of animals are met, but not all owners know about it, know how to access it or feel they need it. There are also inconsistencies in the information provided, leading to confusion around what is considered good practice. This is even the case for information made available from specific credible sectors e.g. animal welfare organisations, veterinarians and behaviourists. The issues around accuracy and consistency of information are even more prevalent when that which is available on the internet is considered.

Understanding of normal and abnormal behaviour was highlighted as a particular issue with owners only tending to seek help when the behaviour became problematic for them, as opposed to indicative of a negative emotional state for the animal. Breaking down barriers on attitude and behaviour towards seeking help and advice are critical and it was noted that within a normal veterinary consultation there is often not enough time. It was also suggested that human behaviour change and clinical behaviour should be taught within veterinary schools.

The group was unsure as to whether owners would have a comprehensive understanding of what sentience is and what it is to be sentient. Even if they did, this knowledge would not necessarily translate into behaviour. The way in which owners treat their animals varies greatly with a seemingly increasing proportion treating pets like human fur babies rather than non human animals.

2. What are the key challenges to ensuring that animal owners and carers have the necessary level of knowledge and understanding of sentience and of individual animals' needs to ensure good welfare?

One of the key challenges is the lack of behaviour training within the veterinary curriculum especially as vets are often the first port of call for advice and provide the route for referral to a clinical animal behaviourist.

A further challenge is determining the accuracy of information available to owners and carers. There is a wealth of good information readily accessible but it is difficult for people to determine themselves what is good or should be avoided and not all that is available is evidence based.

It was suggested that rather than expecting owners to read information, providing practical workshops on pet care would be more effective. This has been shown to be particularly powerful when getting owners to consider the body condition of their pet and whether or not they are obese. Whilst some sections of society will always be more difficult to reach and influence, they shouldn't be ignored and innovative ways to make contact with them need to be identified.

3. Do the challenges differ by sector (e.g. pet owners vs dog groomers)? How could they be addressed and overcome?

The group felt that the challenges differed by sector and that there was a need for different approaches dependent upon what who people were trying to influence, change etc. Some sectors e.g. pet owners, may respond particularly well to outreach rather than distribution of written information. Controlling the cat population via community based action was given as an example and pet obesity was suggested as another issue which could be tackled in a similar way. The potential to create a community of different stakeholders was discussed where advice could be provided as well as peer to peer influence.

Trade associations could provide opportunities for the dissemination of information. For example those providing vocational courses e.g. dog grooming, could include behavioural signs of stress.

The need for a wider cultural shift was also discussed so that people - across all sectors and demographics - became more considerate and empathic in general. Ultimately the norm should be treating others nicely but this in itself creates a significant challenge - how is this achieved on such a large scale? One suggested solution was mandating animal welfare within the school curriculum as well as prerequisite tests for dog ownership; this is the case in some Scandinavian countries.

4. How far do people think the law should go in requiring all those with direct responsibility for animals demonstrate specified levels of knowledge and understanding of the needs of animals in their care? For example, should pet owners be required to undertake validated training ahead of taking on a pet? Should distinctions be made on the basis of:

- areas of animal 'use', e.g. should livestock farmers be required to have/demonstrate more knowledge of their animals' needs than dogs owners - and if so, why?
- species e.g. exotic vs 'commonplace' pets and if so, is this justifiable?

This question resulted in the greatest difference of opinion within the group. Some felt that owners should undertake validated training with others believing that only the ‘good’ people will do it and the ‘bad’ will continue to be irresponsible. It was highlighted that there is no such requirement for training ahead of having children so is it realistic to expect something to be put in place for pre ownership of animals? There were also concerns raised around efficacy of any training and enforcement.

Training ahead of ownership was thought to be useful with good opportunities for pre-purchase information although there was disagreement around which other elements should be included. However if the social norm was such that anyone wanting a pet had to complete pre purchase training then this could be the motivation for societal change.

Other questions raised as part of the discussion included whether or not there was a need to standardise information around pet care. Is the criteria around ownership of an animal from a rescue organisation is too strict? Should the behaviour and therapy industry be professionalised? Who would do this, what would the standards look like, who would enforce it? There is much to be done to regulate the behaviour and therapy industry but that is only part of the solution. Once that is completed there is then the need to communicate it to those who are seeking help.

Key points:

- Is training and regulation for professionals fit for purpose in the modern world?
- Public outreach is needed to ensure that our messaging gets out and achieves an attitudinal and behavioural shift to help them understand what is abnormal behaviour for pets.

It was agreed that both key points require cultural change for success.

Workshop held at:
Animal Sentience: science, policy and ‘real world’ application
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