



# Looking back, looking forward: changes in the scope of the subject ‘animal welfare’ within the World Organisation for Animal Health

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## Summary

Over the past few decades, the scope of animal welfare has expanded within the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). This article takes as its starting point the first issue of the *Scientific and Technical Review* dedicated to the subject in 1994, and compares it to the second of 2005, and to the situation today, almost 20 years later. Changes are grouped into three main areas. The first is the consolidation of animal welfare work within WOAH and the acceptance of it as a subject in its own right, linked to – but nevertheless separate from – animal health. The second is the broadening of the subject’s scope from being mainly concerned with farm animal welfare to encompassing all categories of animals, domesticated and wild. The third is the increased contextualisation of animal welfare to account for different regional attitudes and needs around the globe. Changes in the scope of the subject of animal welfare within WOAH reflect the increase in research in the area and demonstrate that animal welfare is becoming integrated into other complex areas, such as sustainable development. The final part of this article looks forward, speculating on roles that WOAH might play in the future in the area of animal welfare.

## Keywords

Health – Policy – Positive welfare – Sustainable development – Well-being.

## Introduction

Looking back, there was initial scepticism as to how a topic that grew out of society’s concern about the way humans were keeping animals could be the subject of serious scientific study. How ‘animal welfare’ should be defined and how it should be studied were the subject of much debate in the 1960s and subsequent decades, as researchers in the field were carving out their own niche. However, animal welfare emerged stronger from these controversies, with a sound scientific basis, and it is now an accepted scientific discipline.

This article focuses on the subject of animal welfare within the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) and describes how this area has changed. It takes as its starting point the first *Scientific and Technical Review* issue by WOAH (then the OIE) on animal welfare, published in 1994 and called ‘Animal welfare and Veterinary Services’ [1]. The second issue focusing on animal welfare, published in 2005, was entitled ‘Animal welfare: global issues, trends

and challenges’ [2]. Titles are usually well grounded in the views and attitudes of the time. These titles, and those of the articles in each issue, allow for reflection on three lines of development within WOAH and its relationship to animal welfare. These are i) the increasing importance of animal welfare as a scientific discipline in its own right, although of course linked to veterinary science; ii) the broadening of the issue, from mainly farm animals to all categories of animals; and iii) the increasing integration of social, cultural, ethical and political dimensions within the science of animal welfare, to position the issue within a wider global perspective.

## To separate or not to separate animal welfare from animal health

WOAH was founded in 1924 to foster international co-operation and coordination against the spread of infectious animal diseases. By the mid-1990s, the core mandate of the Organisation had been modified to consider improvement in animal health and veterinary public health, based on the idea that controlling the spread of animal diseases

is best achieved by ensuring the health of animals wherever they are [3]. It is therefore not surprising that the title of the first issue of the *Scientific and Technical Review* focusing on this topic linked animal welfare to Veterinary Services. The first article addresses this precise link, with its title 'Animal welfare (well-being), the veterinary profession and Veterinary Services', while the second article is entitled 'International transport of animals: problems relating to disease, welfare and stress'. Two articles at the end of this issue hint towards the future focus on the importance of animal behaviour (ethology) and the fledgling area of assessing animal welfare. These articles are written on veterinary ethology and on animal welfare methodology and criteria. In contrast, the entire first section of the issue published 11 years later, consisting of five articles, focuses on the science-based evaluation of animal welfare, and only one article within the volume addresses the veterinary profession directly.

Why emphasise this point of whether health and welfare are separate, or rather whether welfare is a part of health or health a part of welfare? It is because this question is relevant even today. Some large organisations within Europe, such as the European Food Safety Authority with its Panel on Animal Health and Welfare [4], clearly settled on naming both. The One Welfare concept continues to expand exponentially, being presented as an approach that 'complements the One Health approach' [5]. Although the One Health concept is presented as being broad [6], in practice, its activities focus mainly on infectious diseases (zoonoses and antimicrobial resistance). Perhaps it is time to consider a merged One Health and Welfare concept [7].

## Broadening the scope to address welfare of all animals

The 1994 *Scientific and Technical Review* issue contains articles that deal with the welfare of common farm animals – domestic fowl, bovines, pigs, ducks and rabbits – and all articles focus on welfare in intensive production systems, although there are also articles on draught animals, competition horses and zoo animals. This is in contrast to the later issue, which contains articles that group animals into broader categories, in effect giving equal importance to the welfare of all farm animals, companion animals, laboratory animals, wild and captive animals and aquatic animals. In the intervening years, focus has shifted from reflecting on the specific welfare problems for each species and what should be done to mitigate, reduce and perhaps even eliminate them, towards reflecting on the underlying reasons for these problems, many of which are common across several species.

In farm animals, for example, discussion often relates to production diseases and the extent to which animals can cope with the intensive systems under which they are kept. For

companion animals, common problems are obesity (also an increasing problem for humans) as well as what to do with unwanted individuals, especially stray cats and dogs. Concern about the welfare of aquatic animals was still a relatively new area for WOAAH in 2005, when it was taken up in the *Scientific and Technical Review* for the first time, whereas now it is mainstream.

The broadening of the scope to address a wider range of animals has brought new stakeholders into the discussions within WOAAH on animal welfare, although some issues have been there from the beginning, e.g. transport and slaughter. New in the second issue, however, is the emphasis on animal welfare standards. There are five articles dealing with different aspects and situations in which standards are or should be implemented. In the years since the second issue, the number and variety of quality assurance schemes globally has increased dramatically, and labelling to inform consumers has become a major driving force in promoting animal welfare.

## Animal welfare science meets society

The 2005 *Scientific and Technical Review* issue was published shortly after the first Global Conference on Animal Welfare that WOAAH hosted in Paris. By the time of the conference, a resolution on animal welfare had already been agreed between Members. The second issue dedicated to animal welfare was described at the time as further proof of the commitment to leadership of science-based animal welfare at the international level and to communication of these issues to Members, to the private sector and to society in general [8]. It should be noted that the original and rather long resolution text has since been shortened. WOAAH now uses the term animal welfare to mean 'the physical and mental state of an animal in relation to the conditions in which it lives and dies' [9].

The trend referred to by this subheading is the greater contextualisation of animal welfare science by WOAAH to take account of cultural and societal differences. This is reflected in WOAAH's Global Animal Welfare Strategy [10], which links animal welfare to socio-economic development and environmental sustainability and includes activities to encourage and support the ongoing development, evolution and implementation of regional animal welfare strategies. This regional focus is in keeping with several studies showing both similarities and differences in attitudes to animal welfare around the world [11,12]. Owing to the realisation of the important role of animal welfare in sustainability, the earlier Tripartite collaboration between WOAAH, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization was extended to include the United Nations Environment Programme in a Quadripartite agreement [13].

## Looking forward...

If animal welfare is now a mature science, where might it be heading? And how might that affect WOAAH? The three trends presented previously will probably continue, but to gain further insights, one can also look to other, older disciplines and how their futures developed. One insight is that many disciplines start by being descriptive, then become increasingly experimental in order to test hypotheses, before developing a theoretical (modelling) approach. The very nature of animal welfare means that it may never quite reach the mathematical formulation phase, but that it is increasingly modelled is apparent. This is most evident in the developments around animal welfare risk assessment, which is becoming more quantitative rather than qualitative [14]. The trend towards using advanced statistical and epidemiological analyses to link risk factors to animal welfare outcomes is a step in this direction. These developments build heavily on experiences of risk assessment in animal health. Even if concerns about data protection regulations and competition between companies and sectors make accessing and sharing animal welfare data even more difficult than sharing animal health data, a more efficient use of the welfare-related data already being collected (e.g. at slaughterhouses) will clearly be necessary in the future.

While animal welfare has always been described as a continuum from poor to good, the focus has been on reducing problems, even to the extent of aiming for freedom from them, as immortalised in the Five Freedoms [15]. Since the publication of the second *Scientific and Technical Review* dedicated to animal welfare, there has been increased focus on positive welfare. This started from interest in positive emotional (affective) states in animals [16] but later expanded, drawing heavily on developments in positive human psychology. It highlights that good welfare is more than the absence of poor welfare, and it has stimulated a new branch of animal welfare research with implications for the concept of animal welfare and for the welfare of humans [17].

Looking to the future, it is likely that animal welfare will expand in two directions, as has happened in many other disciplines. It will continue to advance as a fundamental science,

benefiting from studies in neuroscience and human welfare to improve understanding of how animals experience their own situation and how they cope with it. This knowledge already forms the scientific basis for animal welfare regulations, and there is growing demand for evidence-based recommendations and standards for a wide range of species and contexts. Animal welfare is also expanding in another direction. As it becomes more accepted and mainstream, animal welfare is being increasingly integrated with other global challenges, such as climate change, food security and antimicrobial resistance, to name but a few (see also Galindo *et al.* in this issue [18]). There is growing acceptance that animal welfare is a part of sustainability [19] and that improving animal welfare can contribute towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [20,21]. While most readers will immediately see the similarities between SDG 3 (Good health and well-being) and the One Health concept, closer examination also reveals links to the other SDGs. Synergies and conflicts between animal welfare and each of the 17 SDGs were investigated by WOAAH at its Animal Welfare Forum in 2021 [22].

## Conclusions

Machiavelli said, 'Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past'. The aim of this short article was not to review the past and speculate about the future of animal welfare as a whole; rather, the article examined this question from the perspective of the two *Scientific and Technical Review* issues dedicated to animal welfare and the more recent activities of WOAAH. The main conclusion is that since becoming directly involved in animal welfare in the early 1990s, WOAAH has expanded the depth and breadth of its activities in this area. This increase in the scope of its work in animal welfare has reflected developments in the science of animal welfare and society's views on the subject. However, it has also put WOAAH in a valuable position to be able to lead when the planet is facing some of its most serious challenges, and where improving animal welfare can be part of the solution, not considered part of the problem.

# Un regard sur le passé et vers l'avenir : l'évolution du champ couvert par le bien-être animal au sein de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé animale

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## Résumé

Au cours des dernières décennies, le champ couvert par le bien-être animal s'est considérablement accru au sein de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé animale (OMSA). Cet article prend comme point de départ le premier numéro de la *Revue scientifique et technique* consacré à ce sujet et publié en 1994, et le compare au deuxième, publié en 2005, ainsi qu'à la situation actuelle, près de vingt ans après. Les changements sont regroupés en trois grandes catégories. La première est la consolidation des travaux sur le bien-être animal au sein de l'OMSA et son acceptation en tant que thème à part entière, lié à la santé animale mais néanmoins distinct de celle-ci. La seconde est l'élargissement de sa portée, qui ne se limite plus au seul bien-être des animaux d'élevage mais couvre désormais toutes les catégories d'animaux domestiques et sauvages. La troisième est la contextualisation croissante du bien-être animal afin de rendre compte des attitudes et besoins spécifiques propres aux différentes régions du globe. L'évolution du champ couvert par le thème du bien-être animal au sein de l'OMSA reflète l'intensification de la recherche dans ce domaine et témoigne de l'intégration croissante du bien-être animal dans d'autres domaines complexes, en particulier le développement durable. La dernière partie de cet article se projette dans le futur en explorant les rôles que l'OMSA pourrait jouer à l'avenir dans le domaine du bien-être animal.

## Mots-clés

Bien-être – Bien-être positif – Développement durable – Politique – Santé.

# Pasado y futuro: cambios en el alcance del tema del «bienestar animal» dentro de la Organización Mundial de Sanidad Animal

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## Resumen

En las últimas décadas, el alcance del bienestar animal ha ganado terreno dentro de la Organización Mundial de Sanidad Animal (OMSA). Este artículo toma como punto de partida la primera edición de la *Revista científica y técnica* dedicada al tema, publicada en 1994, y la compara con la segunda, publicada en 2005, así como con la situación actual, casi veinte años después. Los cambios se agrupan en tres áreas principales. La primera es la consolidación de la labor en torno al bienestar animal en la OMSA y su reconocimiento como un tema en sí mismo, relacionado con la sanidad animal pero independiente de esta. La segunda es la ampliación del alcance del tema, que pasó de estar centrado principalmente en el bienestar de los animales de granja a abarcar todas las categorías de animales, tanto domésticos como silvestres. La tercera es la creciente contextualización del bienestar animal, adaptándose a las diversas actitudes y necesidades regionales a nivel mundial. Estos cambios en el alcance del bienestar animal en el seno de la OMSA reflejan el aumento de la investigación sobre el tema y muestran cómo el bienestar animal se está integrando en áreas más complejas, como el desarrollo sostenible. En la última parte del artículo se analizan las perspectivas de cara al futuro, especulando sobre los posibles papeles que la OMSA podría desempeñar en el ámbito del bienestar animal en los próximos años.

## Palabras clave

Bienestar – Bienestar positivo – Desarrollo sostenible – Política – Salud.

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