

## GUEST EDITORIAL

# WSAVA animal welfare guidelines for veterinary practitioners and veterinary teams

Veterinarians are considered by society to have expert knowledge and training in animal health and the treatment and prevention of animal disease and are similarly regarded in matters of animal welfare. As such, veterinarians are expected to make judgements regarding the welfare of animals both in their care and beyond (Siegford *et al.* 2010). The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) recommends that veterinarians “should be the leading advocates for the welfare of all animals, recognizing the key contribution that animals make to human society through food production, companionship, biomedical research and education” (OIE 2012). In addition, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE), together with the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), declares that “veterinarians are, and must continually strive to be, the leading advocates for the good welfare of animals in a continually evolving society” (AVMA 2014).

The World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) is a global association representing more than 200,000 individual veterinarians through its 107-member veterinary and veterinary-related associations. The WSAVA is well placed to communicate with veterinarians, pet owners and veterinary regulatory bodies and to advocate for the welfare of companion animals throughout the world. Having an international perspective comes with challenges because the management and treatment of companion animals can vary markedly through geographical regions. This variance may be because of factors such as availability of resources, educational backgrounds, culture, socio-economic realities, community demands and/or societal expectations.

Given this diversity, and to assist veterinarians in taking the lead role as advocates for the welfare of animals, WSAVA commissioned an Animal Welfare Guidelines Group (AWGG) to develop global Animal Welfare Guidelines designed to be utilised by all companion animal veterinarians, no matter the geographical region in which they practice. With these Guidelines, WSAVA follows a culturally sensitive approach, providing non-dogmatic, practical guidance on best practices for practitioners and veterinary teams. While the Guidelines are not prescriptive in their recommendations, allowing for the many different cultures and environments around the world, they do provide clear definitions to use in an ongoing debate regarding the care of animals.

The AWGG membership comes from a variety of backgrounds, experience, expertise and geographic locations and includes academics, companion animal practitioners and veterinarians working with animal welfare organisations. The breadth and depth of the group’s experience ensures that the Guidelines will be both practical and applicable to companion animal

practitioners, regardless of the scope or scale of their veterinary practice or its geographical location. From a one-veterinarian practice to a mobile clinic or a large referral hospital, each can refer to and apply those sections of the Guidelines that are relevant to their clinic and/or practice.

The benefits of helping companion animal practitioners to a better understanding of, and practice in, animal welfare are many and include increased professional satisfaction; enhanced client perceptions; and improved compliance, safety and benefits to individuals and communities (Lue *et al.* 2008, HABRI 2018).

The WSAVA Animal Welfare Guidelines were developed using the most current information available in the field of animal welfare science. The concepts introduced and outlined in the Guidelines, and the recommendations made, are intended to be of direct practical relevance for all companion animal veterinarians. The Guidelines address the following:

- **The recognition and assessment of animal welfare:**
  - The Guidelines briefly introduce the history of animals and human interaction, leading to the concept of animal welfare. Animal welfare is defined “as the physical and psychological, social and environmental well-being of animals”. Animal sentience, ethics, scientific indicators of welfare status and welfare law are examined within the context of the animal, the pet owner and the societal and the environmental interactions.
- **The measurement and monitoring of animal welfare:**
  - Three frameworks for assessing animal welfare are reviewed, with “The Five Animal Welfare Needs” framework being recommended as the simplest to understand and apply within the widest range of clinical settings. The recognition of pain and stress on behaviour and their impact on animal welfare are also examined.
- **Welfare needs surrounding the veterinary visit:**
  - The need for accurate assessment of animal welfare during the veterinary visit is explored, and how to implement such assessment using the Five Animal Welfare Needs during different stages of the visit is suggested. The importance of record keeping, training, and human and animal safety is also underlined.
- **Ethical and moral issues regarding animal welfare:**
  - Animal welfare science, animal ethics and why both need to be considered are reviewed. While animal welfare science can tell us what animals need, and ethics guide us on how we should treat animals. Some common moral problems veterinary professionals might encounter, such as the demand for cosmetic surgeries or the euthanasia of animals, and suggestions on potential ways to address these are explored.

• **Communication of animal welfare needs:**

- Effective communication, both verbal and non-verbal, are important factors in building trust within the client–veterinary relationship, which in turn can help improve adherence, clinical outcomes, veterinary and owner satisfaction, as well as supporting positive animal welfare needs (Shaw *et al.* 2004). Tips on effective communication as well as discussions on the emotive subject of animal abuse and the importance of confidentiality are outlined.

• **Outreach - welfare beyond the veterinary clinic:**

- Promotion of animal welfare outside the clinical setting has multiple benefits, including improved community perceptions of the veterinary profession and the education of the pet-owning public. Different avenues are available for veterinarians, from local grass roots activities to national and international opportunities. While not without potential challenges, this is an approach the individual veterinarian can use to positively influence animal welfare.

The WSAVA's Animal Wellness and Welfare Committee's (AWWC) primary goal is to ensure that welfare is an everyday consideration in all aspects of companion animal practice (WSAVA 2018). An important objective of these Guidelines is to make animal welfare explicit in every veterinary interaction. If animal welfare is not explicitly considered, veterinarians may become focused predominantly on the physical component – the diagnosis and treatment of disease and the maintenance of physical health – and may overlook the animal's experience of the veterinary visit. These Guidelines are an important reminder that good animal welfare is more than the avoidance of suffering and providing good physical health care; it is also the promotion of positive emotional states.

The scope of animal welfare and ethical issues regarding companion animals are very broad-ranging, and these Guidelines cannot cover every circumstance that may arise in the veterinary practice. However, the recommendations and the discussions on the concepts introduced should provide practitioners with an understanding of the principles and critical information needed to make informed decisions. Although these Guidelines are specifically developed for companion animals, particularly dogs and cats, many of the principles are applicable to other species that veterinarians may encounter in their daily clinical life.

The AWGG recommends that all veterinary practitioners become conversant with these Guidelines and apply the principles to daily veterinary interactions in their clinic. These Guidelines may also be used to teach and train veterinary staff and should be made available as reference material for all veterinary team members. It is AWGG's hope that practitioners will be able to use this document to ensure that animal welfare is indeed an everyday consideration. Ultimately, the AWGG believes that the main beneficiaries of these Guidelines are the animals under the care of a competent, caring veterinary team.

In launching these Guidelines, the WSAVA acknowledges that this is but a first step towards improving animal welfare in companion animal veterinary practice throughout the world. Future AWGG goals include providing easy-to-use tool kits and resources that can be used in a variety of areas in the veterinary practice to ensure that animal welfare is prioritised and optimised. The WSAVA hopes that these Guidelines will encourage broad discussion on the role of veterinarians in the promoting and protecting the welfare of the animals under their care and provide benefits far beyond the confines of the veterinary clinic.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These guidelines were produced by the Animal Welfare Guidelines Group (AWGG), a subcommittee of WSAVA's Animal Welfare and Wellness Committee (AWWC), and were made possible with the generous support of the committee's sponsor, Waltham®.

These guidelines would not have been possible without the strong support and input from the following members of the AWWC throughout the development process:

- Melinda Merck DVM (USA)
- Theresa (Tess) Kommedal DVM, ABVP (Norway)
- Karyl Hurley DVM, DACVIM, DECVIM-CA (USA)
- John Rawlings BSc, MSc, PhD (UK)
- Sira Abdul Rahman BVSc, MVSc, PhD (India)
- Sheilah Robertson BVMS, PhD, DACVAA, DECVAA, DACAW, DECAWBM, CVA, MRCVS (USA)

The AWGG also thanks Franck Meijboom MA, PhD (University of Utrecht) for his ethical insights; Melinda Merck DVM for her input on animal abuse and forensics; and Anne Jackson MA, VetMB, PhD Editor-in-Chief, Australian Veterinary Journal and the Australian Veterinary Association for their invaluable editorial advice and assistance.

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