

The new OIE standards are a step towards improving the welfare of working horses, donkeys and mules, and provide a new resource for member countries.

OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code, Volume 1: Section 7 Animal Welfare, Chapter 7.12. Welfare of Working Equids, 25th Edition (2016). World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). ISBN: 978 92 95108 01 1. Available at: <http://www.oie.int/international-standard-setting/terrestrial-code/access-online/>.

E Carter,

UFAW

Horses in our hands

The University of Bristol has recently published a report documenting the findings of a three-year research project, which aimed to: “identify the priority welfare issues currently faced by horses and to explore horse owner and industry experts’ perceptions around these”.

It is clear from the report that the estimated 1.35 million horses in Great Britain are kept both in a wide range of settings (livery yards, farms, racing yards, riding schools, private yards, rented pasture, stables at own premises) and for a variety of purposes (pleasure, competition, riding schools, retired/companions, unbroken, breeding). The researchers noted that: “From the outset it was apparent that capturing the broad range of experiences that people have in caring for and interacting with horses, and their associated views on horse welfare, would be essential to genuinely understand the welfare of horses in England and Wales”.

To clarify what the main welfare priorities for horses are thought to be, the researchers asked 31 relevant stakeholders (such as farriers, veterinarians, welfare workers, trainers, and competition riders) four key questions:

- What does the phrase ‘equine welfare’ mean to you?
- What results in a horse having ‘good’ welfare?
- What results in a horse having ‘poor’ welfare? and
- What examples of poor welfare have you seen?

Through these discussions, 40 specific welfare concerns were highlighted (eg laminitis, social isolations, poorly fitting tack, incorrect feeding, dental problems, rapping). A further 12 broader welfare issues were raised, of which the top three were: horses kept in unsuitable environments; inappropriate ‘use’; and, where behaviour is misunderstood. An interesting finding that came to light during interviews with stakeholders was how the term ‘welfare’ is largely seen as a negative concept and often considered ‘someone else’s problem’.

The researchers then carried out a consultation process with 20 industry experts (veterinarians, equine behaviourists, representatives from industry governing bodies and equine welfare charities) which, taking into account severity, duration and number of horses affected, identified four priority welfare challenges:

- Unresolved stress/pain behaviour;
- Inappropriate nutrition;
- Inappropriate stabling/turnout; and
- Delayed death.

The perceptions of stakeholders to the four welfare challenges was then sought and quotes are used to emphasise the diversity of opinion.

The report goes on to consider the assessment of horse welfare. Currently, a formal assessment of horse welfare, whether at an individual or population level, is rarely carried out and the researchers wished to understand why. Another round of focus group discussions was therefore undertaken, and the findings showed that many people had negative connotations associated with the term welfare assessment (believing it to only occur when measuring poor welfare, and not recognising its value as a tool to promote good welfare) and were also defensive over ‘outside’ assessment. Many stakeholders stressed the importance of assessing welfare both over time and within context.

The researchers close the report with a chapter entitled: ‘Future directions to improve equine welfare in England and Wales’ and include recommendations under the following headings:

- Recommendations on strategic approaches to equine welfare improvement;
- Focusing together on the 4 welfare priorities;
- Amending legislation and updating Codes of Practice;
- Developing welfare assessment protocols for use by horse owners;
- Recommendations for communication about equine welfare with people who own or care for horses;
- Communicating about welfare;
- Identifying suitable sources of advice;
- Ensuring up-to-date advice;
- Developing practical solutions; and
- Encouraging owners.

The researchers stress the importance of those in leadership roles (such as veterinarians, welfare charities, or trainers) to ensure that advice offered to horse owners is based on up-to-date scientific and practical knowledge and that positive and non-threatening language is used. Additionally, they advise a cohesive and joint approach when developing solutions to practical husbandry and management problems. However, it is noted that even when there are suitable solutions available to existing welfare problems, it can be difficult to relay the information to those in direct contact with horses and there may be barriers in changing owner behaviour. The researchers suggest that lessons may be learnt from the farm and companion animal industries as to how best to motivate people to change their behaviour for the benefit of animals.

Horses in Our Hands (2016). A4, 35 pages. World Horse Welfare and Bristol Equine Welfare Project, University of Bristol, UK. Available at: <http://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/survey-equine-welfare-england-and-wales>.

E Carter,

UFAW