The Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) has published some useful reports of late. Topics addressed in recent documents include tackling genetic welfare problems in companion animals, regulation of services in relation to training and behaviour modification in companion animals, and companion animal welfare surveillance.

Its latest report, on welfare assessment in companion animals, which was launched this week, is no less pertinent.

The report looks at the assessment of companion animal welfare in the context of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy and makes the point that reliable means of assessment need to be developed if companion animal welfare is to be improved: 'If we cannot “measure” welfare, how can we know if it is good or bad? How can we evaluate the success of programmes that aim to change animal welfare? Thirdly, how can we identify threats to animal welfare?' However, it points out, as things stand, baseline information is lacking as, indeed, are the structures and systems that will be needed for the necessary data to be obtained.

Ensuring good welfare means more than providing the basic resources for life. 'Most companion animals,' the CAWC points out, 'are sentient and have feelings', and the aim must also be to provide for 'the things they reasonably want for a good quality of life'. The Five Freedoms, which are used to define animals' basic needs, are, it says, 'a starting point, but not an endpoint in defining animal welfare', and its report explores what is meant by 'good welfare' and what can be done to determine whether animals' needs and reasonable wants are being met.

It discusses behavioural, physiological, clinical and pathological and other indices that can be used to assess animal welfare, noting that some of the most useful measures are those which are outcome based. It sees the CAWC's recommendations as a 'deceptively simple statement'. As well as discussing issues surrounding the assessment and measurement of improvements in welfare, its report notes that, to work in partnership, you first need to find your partners. This, it points out, is problematic in the companion animal sector because most advocacy for companion animal welfare is through animal welfare organisations which, while having an important role in providing evidence, do not fulfil the role of 'partners' as seems to be required by the strategy. In this context, it says, would be associations representing 'activity groups' such as pet retailers, boarding establishments, animal sanctuaries and so on – but, it says, 'generally they do not exist'. It believes that developing partners based around certain areas of activity could be 'a very necessary' step in implementing the strategy.

Among the CAWC's recommendations is that companion animal welfare protocols should be developed by species interest groups, animal welfare organisations and bodies representing specific activities. It sees this as a private sector initiative, facilitated by the Government and Defra. It further recommends the establishment of a supervisory body, appointed by the companion animal sector, to ensure a consistent approach.

In discussing the whole range of companion animals and different types of ownership, the CAWC's report (available at www.cawc.org.uk) is both thought-provoking and thoughtful: it gives a useful indication of what could be achieved, while not underestimating the scale of the task ahead.
Measuring welfare

Veterinary Record 2009 164: 159
doi: 10.1136/vr.164.6.159

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/164/6/159

These include:

Email alerting service
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/