

Vet School research paves the way for improved horse welfare

July 12 2016

A vision for improving horse welfare has been set out following research carried out by the University of Bristol's School of Veterinary Sciences and funded by World Horse Welfare. It is hoped the findings, to be unveiled at the House of Commons today [Tuesday 12 July], will enable the welfare priorities of the UK's 800,000 horses to be addressed.

This is the first time welfare organisations, breeders, the equine industry and the veterinary profession have come together to agree on a strategy to best improve the welfare of [horses](#) in the UK.

The equine welfare study found the welfare needs of many horses are not currently being met and the report has highlighted four welfare priorities.

Dr Siobhan Mullan, Research Fellow in Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law at the University of Bristol and one of the report's authors, said: "Bringing together the views of people associated with horses in England and Wales has provided an overview of horse welfare, from the day-to-day concerns of equine caregivers to identifying four priority challenges to equine welfare.

"This research has also identified how equine welfare can be improved, by addressing both the priority challenges, and a wider set of industry and horse-based needs."

Roly Owers, World Horse Welfare Chief Executive, added: "This

research report provides a vital insight to the UK's equine sector, mapping out the welfare landscape from a wide range of sector experts and stakeholders.

"In order for World Horse Welfare and others to most effectively address the welfare challenges facing UK equines, we need to better understand today's welfare priorities and this research will provide a valuable guide to help in driving the focus of our educational initiatives and resources over the next few years."

The priority welfare challenges and solutions outlined in the report are:

Unresolved stress/pain behaviour

Problems associated with unresolved stress/pain behaviour affect large numbers of horses, often for long durations with variable severity of suffering caused to individual horses.

More academic research is needed to fully understand the links between behaviour, stress and pain, and objective measures of stress and pain in horses should be developed. Vets, riding instructors, the Pony Club, riding clubs and the equine press have a role in educating horse caregivers about signs of stress and pain and the appropriate responses. Academics and experts also have a role in tackling this issue through evaluating the effectiveness of intervention programmes.

Inappropriate nutrition

Overfeeding and obesity are the main welfare problems associated with nutrition and affect large numbers of horses, often for a long time with varying severity of suffering.

Vets have a key role in tackling the problems associated with inappropriate nutrition. A consistent approach by all vets is needed, to prevent horse owners choosing vets that don't challenge owners about their horses' nutrition. Feed companies can also play an important role in tackling this issue, although many feed companies already offer appropriate nutrition for a range of horses and exercise situations. Better owner education, based on existing good research, would ensure the right nutritional choices are made for individual horses.

Inappropriate stabling /turnout

Welfare of horses is compromised when the amount of time spent at pasture/stabled does not meet their individual needs, when they are kept in social isolation or when they are exposed to unsuitable grazing conditions. Welfare problems associated with incorrect stabling/turnout affect large numbers of horses for a long time with variable levels of suffering.

Although all horse owners make choices relating to the amount and type of stabling and turnout experienced by their horses, livery yard owners could play a role in addressing this issue. For example, by encouraging different approaches to management, including group housing and the use of all-weather turnout facilities. Strengthening legislation is another possible way for improvement but a 'one size fits all' approach would be inappropriate. For example, for some horses, turn out to pasture may not always be suitable.

Delayed death

Horses may be kept alive inappropriately resulting in firstly, prolonging welfare problems, such as continued suffering of a horse in pain. This affects relatively [large numbers](#) of horses, for short periods of time with

the severity of suffering often being severe. Secondly, an increased risk of suffering, for example where horses are unwanted by their owners, become low value and subsequently aren't cared for well.

One way for improvement could be by putting pressure on the EU to make changes to the passport regulations. In particular, legislation changes that would enable horses who had received medications, including Phenylbutazone, to be slaughtered to enter the human food chain after a six month withdrawal period. In addition, challenging negative attitudes of horse owners towards timely euthanasia is important.

The research, undertaken over a four year period, was to understand the welfare status of horses in England and Wales, identify priority welfare issues and explore horse owner and industry experts' perceptions of these issues.

Stakeholders from across the equine industry contributed to the research: from vets to farriers and [welfare](#) charities to governing body representatives, participants represented a wide-reaching cross section of horse care roles and responsibilities.

More information: Report: 'Horses in our hands' by Sue Horseman, Dr Becky Whay, Dr Siobhan Mullan, Professor Toby Knowles, Professor Alistair Barr and Professor Henry Buller.

Provided by University of Bristol

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