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Use of recorded existing data in animal welfare assessment on group level

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Technological developments have made it easier to gather data directly and indirectly related to animal welfare. These data offer tremendous potential for welfare assessment, but there are also many limitations. In addition to general data quality criteria (accuracy, reliability, robustness etc.), data that were not originally collected for the purpose of welfare assessment need extra scrutiny to avoid pitfalls when interpreting the recordings. However, if these challenges can be properly addressed, existing data are very attractive, being readily available, often covering large populations as well as having continuous recordings over time. Then why has progress in this area not (yet) lived up to expectations?

There are several possible reasons. Among them is that the very concept of animal welfare is so broad that many different parameters have to be recorded if all dimensions are to be addressed. Other areas focus on a specific disease e.g. mastitis, or a specific food safety hazard e.g. salmonella, rather than on assessing the whole areas of 'health' or 'food safety'. Register data often reflects managers' decisions (when to treat, euthanize etc.) rather than being direct observations of welfare outcome indicators. Variation in the skills and attitudes of the stockperson underlying these decisions are therefore a difficult confounder to correct for in such data. A third reason can be that data relevant for animal welfare assessment are owned by different stakeholder groups, with varying interest in sharing.

But things are changing. The recent progress of animal welfare initiatives includes utilization of data from different sources (e.g. combined register and farm observations). Increased societal pressure and consumers are creating a demand for trustworthy documentation of animal welfare in a reasonable, cost effective way. Important for this process, and probably even essential, is that everybody should be acknowledged and rewarded for providing transparent information on animal welfare.

Short CV:

Linda Keeling is Professor of Animal Welfare at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences where she manages an active group of researchers and students in the area of animal behaviour and welfare.

She was a member of the EFSA Animal Health and Animal Welfare panel and was particularly involved in their work on animal-based measures of welfare and animal welfare risk assessment methodology. She is coordinator of the Centre of Excellence for Animal Welfare Science in Sweden.

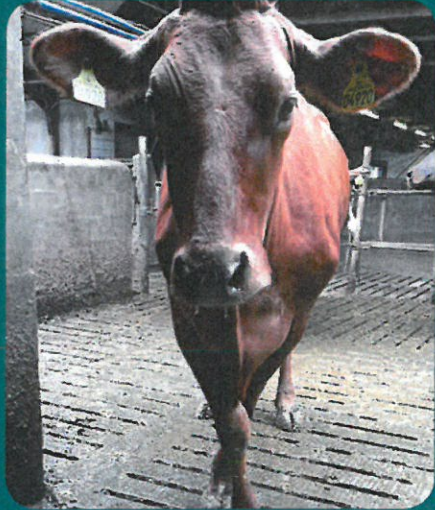
Hans Houe is a Professor in Veterinary Epidemiology and Head of Section for Animal Welfare and Disease Control at Department of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen.

He obtained his veterinary degree (DVM) from 1986 and later PhD and Doctor of Veterinary Science degree (DVSc) from The Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University (now University of Copenhagen).

Former employments include veterinary practice, associate professor in internal medicine and Head of Research Centre for the Management of Animal Production and Health. His current research interest includes: Risk factors, effects and infection dynamics of infectious diseases; Disease control and eradication; Animal health economics; Integrated research within animal welfare; Validation of databases.



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Animal Welfare Conference



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