

Western Coordinating Committee-204 Goals and Why They Are Important to the Future of Animal Production Systems

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ABSTRACT There are scientists who believe that science is value-free and that social and ethical issues are not their concern. The birth of Dolly, the cloned lamb, greatly increased public and scientific awareness of ethical issues raised by molecular biology as they intersect with human experience. There are many other issues involving animal production systems, including animal welfare, rural community issues, and environmental concerns. Last year Germany became the first European nation to grant animals a constitutional right. Several European nations ban the use of traditional battery cages for laying hens and gestation crates for sows. In the US, 37 states have recently passed animal anticruelty laws. Times are changing, and if animal production systems are to be part of the future, animal scientists must join

with society to solve these ethical issues. The Western Coordinating Committee-204 (WCC-204), Animal Bioethics, has as its goals to 1) create a forum in which animal scientists and nonanimal scientists may work together to examine and discuss contentious social issues, 2) provide a means of encouraging the development of research projects dealing with bioethics of the animal sciences, 3) develop mechanisms of outreach that would allow animal scientists to respond directly to consumers and critics, and 4) provide the means for ongoing critical analysis of the animal science professions in the context of their ability to address moral and sociopolitical issues. Animal scientists can no longer ignore social ethics, and by realizing the goals of Western Coordinating Committee-204, we can help maintain the future of animal production systems.

(*Key words:* animal bioethics, multistate project, regional project)

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INTRODUCTION

The birth of Dolly, the cloned sheep, mad-cow disease, foot-and-mouth disease, human infection with *Escheria coli* 0157:H7 due to consumption of contaminated meat, and other high-profile animal-related news items have intensified society's focus on animal agriculture and science. There is growing public unease with the image that animal science is a "beneficial and benign contributor to society, quietly enabling livestock producers to produce cheaper, safer and better quality animal products" (Hodges, 2000). There is growing fear that animal scientists are no longer serving the needs of society but instead those of big business with growing misgivings about the ethics of animal scientists (Hodges, 2000).

There are scientists who believe that their work is value-free and amoral and that they are not responsible for the consequences resulting from their work. Certainly, academic freedom has long been a tenet of academia, and it is unlikely that animal scientists will place restraints

on various aspects of scientific research. But is animal research value-free? Who decides which research priorities will be funded, and who is funding the research? There is growing public perception that big business is influencing or controlling these decisions, with the resulting impression that science is not being conducted for the good of the public (Hodges, 2000).

A case in point is the use of bovine somatotropin to improve milk production. Although bovine somatotropin is considered to have a positive benefit to the dairy industry by most dairy scientists, there is much public concern that it is harmful to cows, could get into the milk supply, and could hurt the small farmer and rural economies (Liebhardt, 1993). This issue has social, economic, political, and ethical considerations. Scientists are faced with possible unwanted consequences of their research. This issue is still a point of controversial debate.

As Thompson (1999) states, animal producers and scientists, with a few notable exceptions, have not done anything wrong in terms of ethics. Clearly, however, as indicated by the controversial issues facing animal industries today, the old model does not work. Thompson states that a new professional ethic is needed. This new

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Abbreviation Key: BST = bovine somatotropin.

ethic should be based on core values required for scientific research but should also include methods of rationality and truth seeking in areas where scientific method is unlikely to solve the problem (Thompson, 1999).

DISCUSSION

Objectives of Western Coordinating Committee-204

As noted by some of the examples above, animal agriculture is becoming increasingly contentious. Society is increasingly skeptical that scientists can solve the problems generated by science, and there is a growing recognition that these issues involve not only a scientific component but social, philosophical, and political components as well (Davis, 1998). With this in mind, Western Coordinating Committee-204 was formed with the following objectives:

- “1. Create a forum in which animal scientists and non-animal scientists (philosophers, social scientists, etc.) may work together to examine and discuss contentious social issues.
2. Provide a means of encouraging the development and coordinating the activities of research projects dealing with bioethics of the animal sciences.
3. Develop mechanisms of outreach that would allow animal scientists to respond directly to consumers and our critics who may question our science and/or production methods.
4. Provide the means for ongoing critical analysis of the animal sciences professions in the context of their ability to address moral and socio-political issues” (Davis et al., 2000).

Agricultural Practice Changes

The history of animal agriculture is relatively short in terms of human history, with humans using animals for meat, fiber, locomotion, or power for only the last 10,000 yr. For much of those 10,000 yr, agriculture was thought of as husbandry, putting animals into an ideal (perceived) environment, the one they had evolved in, and then enhancing their natural survival ability by providing for their needs (Rollin, 2000). Animal numbers per farm were generally small, and it was not in the interest of the animal producer to harm animals, because harming animals harmed the producer. As long as agriculture followed this model, the only social ethic necessary was the prohibition of cruelty (Rollin, 2000).

After World War II, the industrialization process that had taken place in other sectors of the economy reached agriculture. Production increased over 500% in the 3 decades following the end of the war (Taylor and Field, 1998). In 1940, an average farm worker supplied food for 11 people; by 1990 that number had increased to 80 people. Whereas in 1940, 24% of the US population was involved in production agriculture, only 2.0% is now (Taylor and Field, 1998). Disposable income spent on food

decreased from 30% in 1950 to 11.8% in 1990. Mankind has clearly benefited from agricultural industrialization.

The progress was not without cost, however. Mechanization and technological advancement allowed large numbers of animals to be confined. In large animal operations, with small profit margins, less attention is necessarily paid to individual animals (Rollin, 2000). Individual animals may suffer as the size of the unit increases, even though productivity of the unit as a whole increases. With increasing confinement, animals were no longer in natural environments. Battery cages for chickens are an example of the consequences of industrialization. This system of production would not have been possible if it were not for the advances in antibiotics and vaccines that allow producers to confine these animals in high numbers (Rollin, 2000). Technology has thus enabled the potential for suffering of large numbers of animals.

Animal agriculture policy and laws in the US are generally concerned with acceptable practices for production, sale, and transport of animals. Although many laws deal with consumer safety, animal welfare laws have also been a concern (Thompson et al., 1994). Animals have generally been considered chattel property, in that although it would be considered illegal to kill another's animal, it would not be illegal to kill one's own animals. Overt acts of cruelty to animals, however, are prohibited (Thompson et al., 1994). Most cases of animal suffering today, however, would not be considered overt acts of cruelty (Rollin, 2000). The emerging social ethic demands that we consider this aspect. Economic benefit no longer is the driving social ethic where animals are concerned (Rollin, 2000).

That is not to say that animal scientists have not dealt with the issues of animal welfare and suffering. On the contrary, there has been much elegant work in this area, particularly with poultry (Fraser and Broom, 1997; Moberg and Mench, 2000). Unfortunately animal welfare has no simple definition (Bruce and Bruce, 2000). Duncan and Fraser (1997) refer to 3 definitions: 1) the experiences of animals (pain or pleasure), 2) normal biological functioning, and 3) ensuring that the animal can exhibit natural behaviors. As such, the term animal welfare is a reflection of our value system (Duncan and Frazer, 1997). In addition, producers' perceptions of animal welfare and ethical issues may differ from general consumer perceptions. Although producers do vary in their perceptions of animal welfare, a survey conducted by Te Velde et al. (2002) suggested that producers viewed animal welfare in terms of health and that they considered the welfare of their animals to be good. Consumer perceptions, although more divergent than those of the producers, tend to have a negative impression of the life of a meat animal (Te Velde et al., 2002). They not only value health, adequate feed, and protection but also strongly emphasize freedom to move and fulfill natural desires (Te Velde et al., 2002). Although animal science departments are dealing with contemporary issues such as animal welfare, animal waste, and food safety in research, extension, and teaching (Swanson, 1999), there has been much less effort on the part of animal science and industry to deal with the

issue of what constitutes a just use of animals, the controversy surrounding Dolly aside. The consuming public is increasingly concerned with animal issues and, depending on the intensity of the issue, is willing to pay for changes (Bennett et al., 2002).

Societal Changes

Since World War II, there has been a growing disconnect between the consuming public and production agriculture. As noted previously, less than 2% of the public is involved with production agriculture (Taylor and Field, 1998). Contact with animals occurs primarily through pets, zoos, or mass media. As Pollan (2002) stated "except for our pets, real animals—animals living and dying—no longer figure in our everyday lives." Pollan (2002) further states, "the disappearance of animals from our lives has opened a space in which there's no reality check, either on the sentiment or the brutality." Serpell (1986) stated that industrialization led to a change in the way animals are socialized, with pets being on the opposite end of personalization from livestock. Te Velde et al. (2002) indicated that this would result in different moral standards for different animal species. Books ranging from Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1990) to Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2002) can have a major impact on public opinion and policy.

Concurrent with the disconnect with animal lives, in the last 40 to 50 yr, our society has undergone some major changes in extending moral categories for humans previously denied this consideration, i.e., women and minorities (Singer, 1990; Rollin, 2000). Many believe that it is a natural progression to extend these moral evaluations to include animals (Rollin, 2000). In his book, *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1973, Singer (1990) uses the moral arguments developed for people to argue for new ways of dealing with animals. In society we are often faced with balancing the common good with the rights of the individual (Rollin, 2000). These arguments are now being used in assessing the agricultural animal industry. It is important that animal scientists and industry understand the ethical and social issues involved in the animal industry to insure that we maintain a viable industry.

CONCLUSIONS

In November 2002, a proposal to ban gestation crates, placed on the Florida general ballot by animal rights activists, passed 55 to 45%. Although the measure may have only limited effect in Florida, as only 2 of the state's 10 commercial hog farms use gestation crates, it was seen as a major victory for animal rights. In May 2002, Germany became the first European nation to vote to guarantee animal rights in a constitution. Clearly the consuming public is interested in animal agriculture, and the issues can go beyond the science. Our animal industries are changing. Also, what is important today may bear little resemblance to the issues of importance in the future. As scientists, we can be reactive to the change, or we can be

proactive. The fulfilled objectives of Western Coordinating Committee-204 would put in place mechanisms to deal with issues that go beyond science. As Chris Cuomo (2003) wrote, "no matter where we sit in relation to power, we each one of us (and all of us together) have a right and responsibility to shape common cultures that are life-enhancing. . . ."

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