



**WSAVA**  
Global Veterinary Community

# ANIMAL WELFARE GUIDELINES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





# Introduction

The WSAVA Animal Welfare Guidelines for companion animal practitioners and veterinary teams are intended to assist companion animal veterinarians throughout the world in their understanding of contemporary animal welfare concepts and science, and provide guidance on addressing potential animal welfare concerns, navigating some more common ethical issues, and promoting good animal welfare through effective communication, both within the veterinary clinic and beyond.

This executive summary provides a brief overview of these guidelines.





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## CHAPTER 1

# Animal welfare - recognition and assessment

The well-being of animals in the care of humans is an increasing focus for communities around the world. This is particularly true for companion animals\* who often live in close proximity to people. Veterinarians have a responsibility to protect not only the health of companion animals in their care, but also to optimise their welfare, both within and outside the veterinary clinic.<sup>†</sup>

The definition of animal welfare used in these Guidelines is:

**“the physical and psychological, social and environmental well-being of animals”.**

It is important to include both physical and psychological well-being in this definition, as animals can be healthy and well fed but if they are negatively stressed or anxious most of the time, their general welfare can still be poor. While minimum standards are necessary to protect animals from suffering, ultimately, we should all aim to promote positive welfare states.

Animal sentience is an important concept that is increasingly being used in legislation to protect the well-being of animals. Sentience includes an animal's ability to experience positive and negative affective states (emotions plus other feelings such as hunger and thirst), including pain. Animals will choose to seek positive and avoid negative experiences. This occurs regardless of an animal's intelligence; suffering and pleasure result from the ability to feel, and not by the ability to think.

Science can be used to help us to assess animal welfare and determine an animal's physical, emotional and psychological needs. But science alone is not sufficient in discussions on how we treat animals. Animal ethics is a philosophical study of why animals matter morally and how we should treat and care for animals i.e. what is right or wrong in our treatment of animals. The law tells us the minimum standards by which we must treat animals.

Companion animals are integrated into our societies in many and complex ways, and it is important for veterinarians to recognise how



closely animals, humans, society and the environment interact.

When deciding on measures we can use to improve companion animal welfare, we need to remember factors such as cultural values, economics and politics can help or hinder our plans. By working within their communities, veterinarians will play an increasingly important role in protecting and promoting companion animal welfare, which will also improve human and societal welfare.

\* Companion animals can be defined as “domesticated or domestic-bred animals whose physical, emotional, behavioural and social needs can be readily met as companions in the home, or in close daily relationship with humans” (ASPCA, 2018). While this definition can encompass many species of animals, the WSAVA Animal Welfare Guidelines primarily refers to the welfare of dogs and cats. However, the welfare principles are universal and can be applied to other animal species not specifically mentioned here

<sup>†</sup> Throughout these guidelines the term “veterinary clinic” is used as a universal descriptor for any place (or circumstance) where veterinary services are offered, no matter how large or small, advanced or modest in scope. The term is intended to be synonymous with veterinary and/or animal - surgery, practice, facility, centre, hospital etc.





## CHAPTER 2

# Measurement and monitoring of animal welfare

It is important for veterinary professionals working in veterinary clinics to be adequately trained in the assessment and evaluation of an animal's welfare. Animal welfare can be scientifically evaluating evaluated using existing frameworks. The framework chosen for these guidelines as both practical and effective is the Five Welfare Needs, which are elaborated on in Chapter 3.

Welfare indicators can also be categorised as either Input or Output. Inputs include factors such as housing, environment and nutrition, and also the types of social contact with humans and/or animals, and veterinary care. Outputs (e.g. animal behaviour and physiology) are helpful in the evaluation of whether or not adequate inputs are being provided to the animal and are often preferred as they may give a more accurate, objective assessment of the animal's welfare state.

When the needs of the animal are not met, the negative stress can result in fear and anxiety. Specifically, fear is an emotional response resulting in a collection of behaviours that occur in a direct response to a threat and/or perceived danger. Normal fear is adaptive and transient in nature. Anxiety is the emotional state resulting from an animal being exposed to situations with a real or perceived threat, such as in novel situations or where some part of the

environment may predict a negative outcome.

Negative stress in animals can be measured using physiological and behavioural responses. Physiological measures include many commonly used in daily veterinary practice, such as heart rate and body temperature. It is important for veterinarians to consider physiological parameters such as these not only in terms of the animal's physical health, but also if the animal is very fearful or anxious, as the physiological responses may look similar. Knowledge of the normal behaviour of the animals is an important additional window to how the animal is feeling. While each animal will have an individual and unique response, there are four general patterns shown by animals under stress: flight, fight, fiddle/fidget and freeze.

It is important for veterinarians to recognise and treat pain in animals as a priority. A change in behaviour may be the first sign that an animal is in pain, but different individual animals may express pain overtly or covertly. Veterinarians need to be proficient in the objective measures that can be used for animal pain (e.g. Glasgow composite short form pain scale) and knowledgeable in the appropriate drugs to use to provide pain relief.

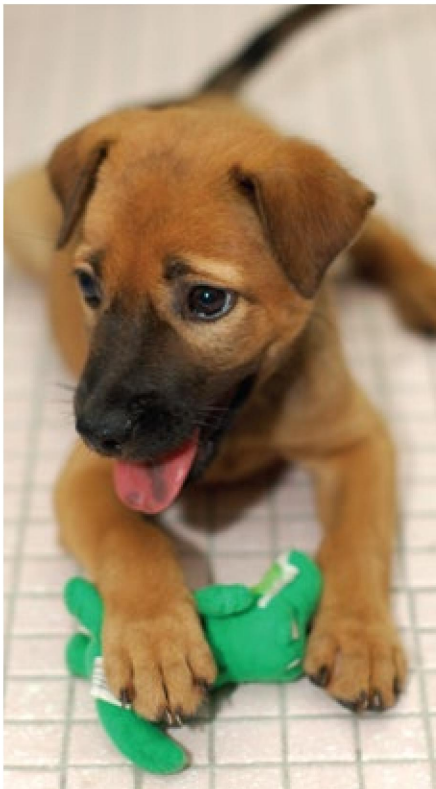


## CHAPTER 3

# Welfare needs surrounding the veterinary visit

While there are many disciplines within the veterinary field, it is likely that companion animal veterinarians will spend at least some of their time in the clinic or practice environment. Thus, an understanding and appreciation of animal welfare considerations in the clinical setting is of fundamental importance.

The reasons for this importance are many but include improved patient care and the enhancement of the veterinarian-client relationship (including client compliance/adherence). Improved clinical outcomes, greater client, veterinarian and veterinary staff satisfaction, all of which can significantly influence both personal and business well-being. The welfare requirements of the veterinary patient in the clinical environment may be assessed using the Five Welfare Needs framework:



### **1. The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.**

Companion animals are sentient beings, having the capacity to feel, perceive or experience subjectively. As such they are not only capable of feeling pain and distress, but also of having positive experiences such as comfort and pleasure. Efforts to mitigate negative and support more positive experiences and emotions are necessary to ensure good/positive welfare during the veterinary visit.

### **2. The need for a suitable environment.**

Our veterinary patients have both species- specific and individual environmental needs, including space requirements and auditory, olfactory, tactile and visual cues. Recommendations on how to address these in the clinic or practice are presented in the guidelines.

### **3. The need for a suitable diet.**

There are multiple factors that determine diet suitability. The patient species, breed, age, size, health status and behaviour need all be considered. Recommendations on what, when and how a patient is fed, as well as implementation strategies in the clinic environment are proposed.

### **4. The need to be housed with or apart from other animals.**

Individual space, interactions with other animals and/ or veterinary staff, quiet/respice times, length of hospitalization/ boarding are all factors that need assessment. Separation into species-specific housing is recommended. Implementation requires consideration of the patients' perspective during all phases of the veterinary encounter.

### **5. The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns.**

The veterinary visit can, by its very nature, be an uncomfortable experience for our animal patients resulting emotional & physical distress. Recommendations to mitigate stressors through appropriate scheduling, facility layout, lighting options, olfactory & auditory controls have been made.

Additional areas that are important to our patient's welfare involve their needs during all stages of the veterinary visit; effective but safe and acceptable handling and restraint techniques; and the importance of appropriate documentation and accurate records. Consideration must be given not only to the patient's health and welfare, but also to the safety and health of those in the workplace, including veterinary staff and visitors to the clinic.

Awareness of and addressing the welfare needs of our patients throughout the veterinary visit can positively impact treatment outcomes, client, staff and doctor satisfaction, as well as business reputation and wellness.



## CHAPTER 4

# Ethical questions and moral issues



Moral problems can be approached in a logical and systematic manner by following these steps:

### 1. Exploration: Identify the issues involved

- Distinguish between animal welfare and other ethical issues*
- Identify legal issues*

### 2. Analysis: Establish the interest of the affected parties

- Identify the parties involved and their responsibilities*
- For each party, identify their stand-point and interest*

### 3. Action: Choose a course of action

- List the possible actions*
- Decide on the "best-fit" option*
- Manage disagreements*

### 4. Refinement: Minimise any negative effects of the decision

- Prioritize effects that promote positive welfare and reduce negative welfare*

Common moral problems seen in veterinary practice include the selective breeding of companion animals, euthanasia, cosmetic and convenience surgeries, advanced veterinary treatment, client confidentiality, animal cruelty and neglect, animal desexing, and nutritional-related welfare issues. Each of these issues is discussed in the guidelines from different ethical stand-points, common actions, and the effect on animal welfare.

Ethics concern the actions of humans and the values that guide those actions. Whereas, with animal welfare, the concern is focused on the experiences of animals. Animal welfare science provides information of the physiological and behavioural responses of an animal, while animal ethics involves human-animal relationships, and provides guidance on how people should treat and care for animals.

The four main groups of ethical theories relating to companion animals are summarised below:

ETHICAL THEORY	DESCRIPTION
<b>Contractarian</b>	Animals cannot enter a moral community through mutual agreement or contracts with each other. Therefore, humans have no moral obligation towards animals, except where it matters indirectly.
<b>Utilitarian</b>	Animals deserve moral consideration and the overall utility of all sentient beings involved should be maximised. In utilising animals for human benefit, the consequences of the animals' welfare must be considered.
<b>Animal Rights</b>	Animals have an inherent worth and have rights that need to be protected. This is often made operational in terms of a right to life and liberty.
<b>Relational</b>	The relational view considers the human relationship to animals as the central point for ethical judgements.

Veterinarians are frequently called upon to make ethical judgements. Often there are ethical dilemmas where two or more ethical principles conflict with no obvious way to prioritise one action over another. Or there are moral problems, where the veterinarian's own moral code of conduct conflicts with professional or societal ethical expectations. Moral problems and ethical dilemmas can result in physiological, psychological and emotional anguish if unresolved.



## CHAPTER 5

# Communication with owners regarding animal welfare

Communicating effectively with pet owners is vital to the success of both the veterinary practice, and to improving animal welfare. There is increasing recognition of the significance of the human-animal bond and the relationships people have with their companion animals. Many owners regard their pet as a family member, and depend on the veterinary team to optimise the pet's health and welfare. In addition to scientific, technical and clinical skills, it is necessary that veterinarians have or develop proficient communication skills to ensure the health and welfare of the companion animal, the owner and the people working in the veterinary clinic.

Veterinarian–client interactions and the choice of communication style should be tailored to the individual client and patient. A joint venture between the veterinarian and client will provide optimal care for the animal.

Communication exists of both verbal (20%) and non-verbal (80%) communication. When speaking with pet owners, professional jargon/terminology should be avoided as this may lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

Using open-ended and closed questions when appropriate, as well as reflective listening will help the veterinarian diagnostically and to understand and appreciate client concerns.

*Continued...*







One of the factors that optimises animal welfare is compliance or adherence. Compliance in veterinary medicine is “the consistency and accuracy with which a patient follows a prescribed regimen”. Veterinary professionals can have a substantial impact effect on improving client adherence by prioritising and documenting the value of recommendations made and by appropriately addressing clients’ concerns and questions about these recommendations.

Another factor vital for the veterinarian in relationship-building with the pet owner is the expression of empathy. This gives the pet owner self-confidence. Confidence or self-esteem is one of the most important determinants of successful behaviour change. Owners who must change their management strategies regarding their pets are more successful when they have confidence and can make a successful change in lifestyle. Dealing with obesity in pets is an example.

It is imperative that the client has sufficient trust in the veterinarian and

veterinary staff to feel the freedom to not only communicate information about the animal’s physical condition(s) but also, if necessary, raise any personal issues that may influence the animal’s welfare. The client needs to be certain that the veterinarian will treat this information with care.

Animal mistreatment, cruelty and/or abuse are global issues and cause an incalculable degree of animal suffering. The veterinarian must recognise these issues in the clinical setting and know how to act authoritatively, confidently and in the animal’s best interests. In such cases especially patient confidentiality is very important.

It is also very important that the veterinary team have the confidence to communicate their concerns about an animal’s or client’s circumstances. Being apprehensive about acting or voicing concerns is understandable, but not professionally acceptable – as advocates for animal welfare, veterinary professionals must always prioritise protecting animals from (further) harm.

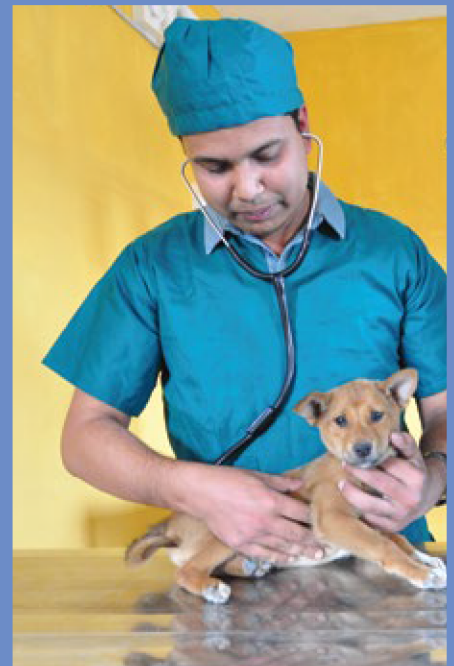
## CHAPTER 6

# Outreach – welfare beyond your clinic

Concern for, and awareness of, the welfare of animals is absolutely integral to veterinary practice. And to effectively promote the value of animals in society, veterinarians must extend their animal welfare activities beyond their clinic. Many animal welfare issues faced by veterinarians can be addressed by improving the engagement and education of pet owners. Actively promoting positive or “good” animal welfare “beyond your walls” has many benefits - for the animals themselves, societies, veterinary clinics and the veterinary profession, organisations and animal charities.

When considering participating in or starting an outreach program, veterinarians need to consider the level of commitment, prioritise important issues, know the main stakeholders involved, and understand the legal issues.

The table below lists levels and some examples of outreach:



While there are many advantages to doing outreach work, there can also be some potential risks and challenges that need to be considered. When working with other parties, it is important to align values and expected outcomes. Care must be taken to ensure work done will benefit both animals and people, and is done with a level of social responsibility, good veterinary care, and to work within the limits of one's knowledge.

The variety of outreach programs ensures that there is likely something to suit every veterinarian. By starting small, being generous with your time, and doing your homework to avoid potential pitfalls, all veterinarians can have a positive impact on animal welfare and influence far beyond the clinic door.

LEVELS OF OUTREACH	EXAMPLES
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<b><i>Community / grassroots</i></b>	Veterinary clinic open-days, dog shows, donating time and services, information events, school engagement and using traditional & social media to engage with the community.
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<b><i>Organisations, NGOs &amp; academia</i></b>	Donations, help fundraising, participating in local veterinary associations and allied groups, research collaborations, providing advice and training, veterinary services and neutering, neutering voucher schemes, and reporting animal cruelty or domestic abuse
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<b><i>National</i></b>	Volunteering for veterinary associations, national programs, data collection and analysis, and national projects
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<b><i>International</i></b>	WSAVA and other veterinary associations, international NGOs and INGOs, and cross-border volunteering for ethical judgements.
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This guideline was produced by WSAVA's Animal Wellness & Welfare Committee (AWWC) and supported by our partners at MARS and the Purina Institute.

The AWWC's goal is to make animal welfare an everyday consideration for companion animal practitioners worldwide.

For the full guidelines, please visit

[www.wsava.org](http://www.wsava.org)





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