

Attitudes towards an animal welfare code by pet shop staff

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ABSTRACT

During 1997/98, thirty pet shops (involving 75 participants) in Perth, Western Australia, undertook two questionnaire surveys relating to the use of a pet shop animal welfare code of practice. Shops were allocated to one of three groups who received different sets of information designed to influence attitudes towards animal welfare. The treatments were: to read and comment on a draft code of animal welfare; to do this and assess their own animal welfare practices; to read the code, self-assess workplace practice, and also participate in an accreditation scheme.

Initially all three groups favoured the draft code, although some staff forecast problems in implementation and doubted if customers would favour shops complying with a code. After studying the information, staff support to adopt a code of practice declined in two of the three groups, those having most information being least inclined to support a code.

All groups considered that welfare codes offered no financial advantage, which may explain why pet shop owners did not favour accreditation based on a welfare code. Paradoxically, two thirds of respondents indicated that they would be willing to pay for an accreditation scheme.

Pet shops in Western Australia have an underlying interest in animal welfare. However, if a welfare code of practice is to be introduced, it may not be adopted willingly unless assistance is provided to aid implementation, including self-assessment packages, advice on cost-effective methods to comply with standards, and community awareness programs to promote such standards.

INTRODUCTION

Codes of practice have been developed for a range of industries over the last 20 years or so. Their main purpose has been to provide an assurance to consumers that business activities are conducted in accordance with recognised standards. Initially, health issues were an important focus, not only for consumers, but also for customers using particular products and/or services. In recent years, codes have been used as the foundation for many quality assurance programs, with associated procedures manuals providing more detail than industry specific codes.

To a degree, codes of practice have defined industry standards which help address community and consumer concerns. By complying with their respective code, businesses are able to demonstrate a commitment to improving and maintaining work practices.

Unfortunately, codes have two major limitations. Firstly, unless a compliance system is in place, consumers can not be confident that a code is being adhered to.

In addition, consumer and community attitudes and expectations change over time. Unless codes are reviewed and updated on a regular basis, they soon lose credibility and importance.

Other features of codes are that they are usually developed by only one or two industry representatives, often give little detail on how they should be implemented and what their potential impact might be on staff, customers and profitability. These aspects may deter businesses from being overly enthusiastic about adopting a code as they may be viewed as being restrictive and having few benefits to future productivity and viability.

ANIMAL WELFARE CODES OF PRACTICE

With limited resources and often inadequate and outdated legislation, governments face a dilemma in responding to pressure from the animal welfare lobby to ensure good standards of animal care and treatment. One solution has been the development of animal welfare codes of practice which seek to define acceptable animal welfare standards for an industry¹. In Australia, animal welfare legislation is a State, not Commonwealth responsibility, with each State proclaiming their own Act relating to animal welfare; so in essence codes of practice are primarily a State responsibility. Government responsibility for animal welfare varies between States. Until the last two decades, most States had no government instrumentality involved in overseeing animal welfare. Enforcement of the Act was deemed a responsibility of the RSPCA, a non-profit organisation. However, with increasing community pressure, State governments have established animal welfare units. In some States, such as New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania, the Commonwealth lead has been followed, with the Act being administered through the agriculture or primary industry/natural resources portfolio. In other States, such as Western Australia and South Australia, overseeing animal welfare legislation is the responsibility of local government.

The first Australian animal welfare code of practice was the Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes. The first edition of this code was published in 1979. Similarly, national model codes of practice for the welfare of animals were developed for livestock industries through the Subcommittee on Animal Welfare, a national government committee.

New South Wales, ACT, Victoria and South Australia, but not Western Australia (WA), Queensland, Tasmania or the Northern Territory have developed welfare codes of practice for pet shops. In 1996, Victoria also introduced a licensing scheme for pet shops which is operated through local government authorities. A condition of licensing is compliance with the State's animal welfare code of practice.

Businesses licensed under the scheme must pay an annual fee, which basically covers the costs of inspecting premises. To date, no other States have followed suit and implemented a similar licensing scheme.

Some people have viewed animal welfare codes of practice as a means of allowing self-regulation, to demonstrate to the community that at least minimum standards are adhered to². For this to be fulfilled, a high level of industry awareness and sense of responsibility for codes are required. Concerns have also been expressed regarding the use and value of codes. The majority of people directly involved in animal industries have had limited knowledge of or opportunity to participate in developing animal welfare standards. Some published codes have also been poorly disseminated. In 1991, a report commissioned by the sub-committee on animal welfare on the impact of the pig welfare code showed that limited participation and poor promotion to the industry resulted in the code having little impact on animal welfare standards³. This code had been published nearly ten years prior to this.

At the 1997 RSPCA Australia Scientific Seminar, Glenys Oogjes of Animals Australia (an active animal rights organisation) criticised codes of practice stating that the majority of industry members are not aware of or have little commitment to such codes⁴. She stated that in many cases neither government nor industry has printed and distributed codes to animal users. Oogjes also condemned codes in that they mainly reflect current industry practice rather than promote high welfare standards, and that in most situations there is little enforcement.

In recent years there has been increased public concern about animal welfare in the intensive livestock industries. In response, the pig industry has attempted to improve awareness of the welfare code of practice. Welfare standards have been incorporated into the Australian Pork Industry Quality Program and there has been an increase in research on pig housing and management. However, the development and promotion of the other welfare codes of practice in other industries have not been so progressive.

THE PROJECT

Background

In 1994, an advisory committee of government, industry and community representatives which had reviewed the Western Australian *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1920* recommended a licensing scheme similar to the Victorian system for animal trades, including pet shops. However, Western Australia at this time did not have an Animal Welfare Code for Pet Shops. This situation provided an opportunity to undertake a project to examine protocols for developing standards and assessing attitudes towards a code by encouraging greater industry involvement prior to implementation of such a code. It was believed that increasing industry participation:

- could lead to a reduction in government input into code development and control,
- would help address community concerns relating to animal welfare, and
- would be consistent with the preference of many governments to reduce regulation and minimise costs.

The project was also designed to gauge response by the industry to a licensing and/or accreditation scheme for demonstrating compliance with a code. At the time, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), the peak national industry association, had mooted an interest in establishing an industry based accreditation scheme.

Materials and methods

Thirty pet shops in Perth, which constituted approximately 50% of all metropolitan pet shops, agreed to participate in the study. They were randomly allocated to three groups, which received different packages of information on animal welfare. Seventy-five staff from the shops were surveyed before ('pre') and after ('post') exposure to this material to determine if changes in attitude were associated with increasing levels of information material promoting animal welfare.

The first group of shops (Group 1) followed a similar approach used in the development of other industry codes, which simply involved circulating a draft code for comment ('WA Code of Practice for the Care of Animals in Pet Shops'). Content of the draft code was based on pet shop codes from other States.

Group 2 was asked to comment on the same draft code and also to compare, using a self-assessment sheet, their workplace practices, such as frequency of cleaning cages and vaccination regimes. With assistance from an experienced pet shop operator, a self-assessment sheet was developed specifically for pet shop staff to use as part of the project.

The third group, like Group 2, examined the draft code and made self-assessments, but also assessed a trial accreditation scheme. The accreditation scheme proposed that shops seek a 'star' rating to indicate their level of compliance with good animal welfare practice. Shop managers could nominate the 'star' rating, ranging from a minimum 1-star to the maximum 4-star depending on the number of criteria complied with. It was felt that a star rating would help managers to gradually improve standards rather than only offering full compliance or no compliance. At the time the second questionnaire was completed, an audit was conducted to assess if the nominated 'star' rating was achieved.

The criteria used for the trial accreditation scheme were:

Essential (for 1-star)

1. Written information on care, feeding and health care must be provided to customers purchasing animals.
2. An appropriate daily health check of all animals must be made by skilled staff.
3. A high level of hygiene including appropriate cleaning must be maintained and all cages must be disinfected using a proprietary preparation.
4. A nominated veterinarian must be used (e.g. for pre-sale vaccination of animals, advice for treatment of injury and ill health, and euthanasia).

Additional (for 2-star or higher)

5. The proposed code of practice must be complied with.
6. Warranty statements for pups and kittens must be used.

7. All newly acquired animals must be isolated and observed for signs of illness for 24 hours before being mixed with resident animals or being sold.
8. Animals must only be sourced from suppliers with high standards of care and welfare consistent with the proposed code of practice and who provide animals that are clean and healthy.
9. Formal in-house training must be given for staff, or support given for staff to undertake formal training via recognised providers such as technical colleges, in the care and management of animals.
10. Records relating to the Department of Conservation and Land Management licence requirements for native/declared birds as well as details of pups and kittens (date acquired, supplier, treatment, date sold) must be kept.

Thus, 'test' materials for each group consisted of:

GROUP 1	GROUP 2	GROUP 3
Draft code	Draft code Self-assessment sheet	Draft code Self-assessment sheet 'Trial' accreditation scheme

Initially all shops were visited to outline the project. All participants were asked to read the proposed code, and complete a questionnaire, which was collected six weeks later. After the six-week period, the second questionnaire and the appropriate additional test materials (self-assessment sheet with or without the accreditation guidelines) were delivered and explained to staff of the allocated shops in each group. Participants were then given a couple of months to complete Questionnaire 2.

In the surveys, respondents were asked about their attitudes to various welfare issues, specifically:

- 1) content of the code,
- 2) benefits of the code (e.g. on image, income, etc),
- 3) impact of self-assessment and/or accreditation, and
- 4) value of accreditation.

A recognised statistical software program was used to analyse the data and various statistical tests were applied to identify significant differences between groups and each participant's response before and after exposure to the 'test' materials.

Results

• Initial response to the draft code

The data from Questionnaire 1 (see Table 1) showed strong support for the statements that the code was easy to understand (average 94%), important to the future of the industry (average 90%), that all shops should adopt the code (average 90%) and that a code would improve the health and welfare of animals in shops (average 88%). However, there was on average lower levels of support for believing that customers would prefer shops that complied with the code (average 75%) and that it would be easy to implement (63%).

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who strongly agreed with specific statements relating to the code before exposure to test materials

Question	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Is the code easy to understand?	91%	96%	97%
Is the code important to the future of the industry?	86%	100%	84%
Should the code be adopted by all members of the industry?	86%	95%	91%
Will the code improve health and welfare of animals in pet shops?	82%	90%	90%
Would customers prefer shops that comply with a code?	64%	95%	67%
Is the code easy to implement?	57%	71%	66%

• Use of the code

Questions were asked before and after respondents assessed the test material to indicate how strongly they agreed with six statements about the code. Respondents in Groups 2 and 3 were less supportive of the code after seeing the test material than before, while Group 1 was more supportive. Significant changes are shown in Table 2 (i.e. less or more favourable) with no significant change being depicted as NC.

Table 2: Summary of changes in attitude following exposure to test materials for each group for each item

Question	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Is the code easy to understand?	NC	NC	Less favourable
Is the code important to the future of the industry?	NC	Less favourable	NC
Should the code be adopted by all members of the industry?	More favourable	NC	Less favourable
Will the code improve health and welfare of animals in pet shops?	NC	NC	Less favourable
Would customers prefer shops that comply with a code?	NC	NC	NC
Is the code easy to implement?	NC	NC	NC

• Benefits of the code

When respondents were asked what they considered would be the most likely improvement resulting from a code, all groups considered the greatest impact would be on the health and welfare of animals and the least impact on net income (Table 3 over the page). This was the pattern both before and after exposure to the test materials.

Table 3: Perceived ranking of benefits of the code to shop income; customer service; animal health and welfare; and image of the industry, before and after distribution of the test materials

	Group 1 Code only		Group 2 Self-assessment sheet		Group 3 Self-assessment sheet + trial accreditation	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Net income of the shop	4th	4th	4th	4th	4th	4th
Level of customer service	2nd	3rd	3rd	3rd	2nd	3rd
Health and welfare of animals in pet shops	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st
Image of the pet shop industry	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd	3rd	2nd

• **Impact of undertaking self-assessment and/or accreditation**

Respondents in Groups 2 and 3 were asked whether the various information materials stimulated thinking about, or would improve animal welfare.

The usage rate for the self-assessment sheet was quite high (85% in the combined groups), which suggests an interest in welfare, justifying confidence in the interpretation of responses to questions on the impact of the self-assessment sheet.

There were no significant differences between the responses from each group. An average of 50% of respondents for both groups thought more about animal welfare following the use of the sheet but an average of only 32% believed the sheet would help improve animal welfare (Table 4). However, not one respondent in either group strongly disagreed that the self-assessment sheet did not encourage more thinking about animal welfare.

Table 4: Effects on Groups 2 and 3 respondents who used the 'self assessment' sheet

	Thought more about animal welfare		Helpful in improving animal welfare	
	Group 2	Group 3	Group 2	Group 3
No	0%	0%	21%	16%
Ambivalent	30%	31%	33%	47%
Yes	53%	47%	38%	25%
No answer	17%	22%	8%	12%

Ninety one percent of respondents in Group 3 participated in the accreditation scheme and it appears that the scheme encouraged almost half of these to think more about animal welfare (Table 5). Slightly fewer (40%) considered it helpful in improving animal welfare.

Table 5: Effects on Group 3 respondents who assessed the 'accreditation' scheme

	Thought more about animal welfare	Helpful in improving animal welfare
No	7%	15%
Ambivalent	45%	45%
Yes	48%	40%

• **Value of accreditation**

The value of accreditation was ascertained by asking respondents their preference for either licensing or accreditation, and in monetary terms what they would be willing to pay for an accreditation scheme.

At the start and end of the project all groups showed a preference for an industry based accreditation scheme over government licensing to demonstrate compliance with an animal welfare code of practice (Table 6). Percentages of no answers are not included.

Table 6: Percentage of respondents indicating their preference for either a licensing scheme or an accreditation scheme before and after exposure to the test material

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Licence	9%	34%	29%	29%	37%	22%
Accreditation	63%	50%	48%	67%	63%	62%

• **Willingness to pay for annual accreditation**

An average of 56% of all respondents were willing to pay \$50-\$300 for annual accreditation, with an average of 31% willing to pay \$200 or more (Table 7). Also, a total of 71% of respondents in Group 2 were willing to pay between \$50-\$400 for an accreditation scheme compared to 55% and 51% of Groups 3 and 1 respectively.

Table 7: Percentage of respondents indicating the amount willing to pay for annual accreditation

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
\$400	5%	0%	3%
\$300	0%	10%	0%
\$200	36%	33%	25%
\$50-\$150	10%	23%	27%
Should be free	23%	18%	21%
Would not pay	5%	0%	8%
No answer	21%	11%	16%

Discussion

The results revealed some possible consequences of trying to enhance support for animal welfare amongst pet shop staff using a code of practice by providing them with extra information. In particular, there was an unexpected difference for the group that participated in a trial accreditation scheme. Rather than encouraging a more positive attitude towards animal welfare, this group tended to value the code less favourably after exposure to extra information. The results collectively suggest that as participants were exposed to more materials and had a greater opportunity to consider applying the code in their own situation, they began to have doubts regarding its value. Support for the code to be adopted by all shops fell significantly in the accreditation scheme group, whereas the group that read only the code increased its support for industry adoption.

Overall, there was some evidence that staff believed that customers would prefer shops that complied with a code of practice with 75% of all respondents supporting this statement. However, there was less support believing that the code would be easy to implement. All groups also believed that the code would have little impact on increasing the net income of a shop. It was interesting that despite strong support for believing that customers would prefer shops that comply with a code, there was little expectation that net income would increase. Furthermore, there was some indication that the code might be difficult to implement. This may suggest that high inputs in terms of money or time might be required to establish such a system.

The survey question on the perceived value of a proposed accreditation scheme was included to encourage respondents to choose between a licensing and an accreditation scheme to demonstrate compliance with a welfare code. The low number of respondents answering this question suggests there was an uncertainty and wariness of what is involved or a fear of commitment to any form of control. The results did reveal quite a favourable attitude considering specific details of a scheme were not provided, and pet shop owners like many other business operators are unlikely to pay for something that was not valued.

Data on the impact of the self-assessment sheet indicated that about half of groups 2 and 3 were greatly influenced to think more about animal welfare as a result. The most interesting finding was that there were no negative responses regarding the sheet as being thought provoking. However, some who thought more about animal welfare did not believe it was helpful in improving standards. Half of the accreditation group indicated that the scheme increased thinking about animal welfare with 40% stating that the scheme would help improve welfare standards.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the study did not support the hypothesis that encouraging people in the pet shop industry to participate in setting their own animal welfare standards would improve attitudes. There appears to be a trend in the community for codes of practice to play an increasing role in providing an assurance that recognised standards are maintained.

Codes are also viewed as striking a balance between over- and under- regulation. However, this assurance can only be provided if codes are both available and adequately adopted by industry members. The data here suggest that while pet shop staff have a commendable interest in animal welfare, it is not a simple matter to enhance this by supplying information material, and thus have the pet shop industry establish and implement its own code of practice for animal welfare. Several approaches may help encourage a greater level of understanding and commitment to a welfare code including incorporating self-assessment of practices against industry benchmarks and promotion of those businesses that comply with a code to the community. These findings may have implications for the operation of licensing or accreditation schemes which are based on codes for pet shops as well as other animal trades such as horse hiring establishments, and dog and cat breeding kennels.

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