

# BVA position on animal welfare

## Executive summary

Recognising animals as sentient beings provides the basis for our moral concern for the welfare of animals. Animals are living beings with the capacity to have feelings, including pain and pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

Enhancing, protecting and securing the health and welfare of animals is the fundamental purpose of the veterinary profession. Animal welfare is a rapidly evolving social concern, and the veterinary profession plays a leading role in an interdisciplinary community seeking to promote the best interests of animals and improve their treatment, wherever they are used or impacted by people.

The importance of animal welfare for veterinary surgeons is conveyed in the declaration that each veterinary surgeon makes upon admission to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons: “...ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care.”

The veterinary profession has a crucial role to play in advancing of animal welfare at individual, community, national and international levels. The [BVA Animal Welfare Strategy ‘Vets speaking up for animal welfare’](#) provides a framework to help vets advocate good animal welfare outcomes for all animals.

With developments in animal welfare science, we are now better able to characterise animal welfare, and frameworks for assessing and managing animal welfare have evolved.<sup>2</sup> Historically, animal welfare assessment and management has centred on identifying and minimising negative effects on animal welfare. More recently, animal welfare science has shifted towards models that strive not only to minimise negative welfare effects but also to maximise positive welfare effects. Such approaches recognise that animals used by humans should have, at least, ‘a life worth living’, with a growing number of animals having a ‘good life’.<sup>3,4</sup>

In light of these advances in understanding, in this position we set out how key stakeholders can work together to protect, advocate and enhance animal welfare. Our recommendations cover:

- Defining and assessing animal welfare
- Human-animal interactions
- Animal welfare in UK legislation
- The role of the veterinary profession in advocating for animal welfare
- Veterinary training and education in animal welfare

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<sup>1</sup> British Veterinary Association, 2021. BVA position on the recognition of animals as sentient beings. Available at: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/4052/bva-policy-position-on-the-recognition-of-animals-as-sentient-beings.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Mellor, D. J., 2016. Updating animal welfare thinking: Moving beyond the “five freedoms” towards “A life worth living.” *Animals*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

<sup>3</sup> FVE/AVMA/CVMA, 2020. Joint AVMA-FVE-CVMA statement on the roles of veterinarians in promoting animal welfare. <https://fve.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/FVE-AVMA-CVMA-position-statement-on-animal-welfare-Clean-Version.docx.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Mellor, D. J., 2016. Updating animal welfare thinking: Moving beyond the “five freedoms” towards “A life worth living.” *Animals*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

## Summary of recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** To have a ‘good life’, and at least a ‘life worth living’, animals must have the opportunity to have positive experiences. Over time, positive experiences should outweigh negative experiences. This should encompass the whole of an animal’s life.

**Recommendation 2:** To protect, advocate and enhance animal welfare, the welfare of sentient animals should be assessed using up-to-date concepts, tools and scientific approaches. This includes awareness and assessments of behaviour as both a welfare indicator and welfare determinant, and assessment of mental wellbeing.

**Recommendation 3:** Animal health and welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human want or need. Wherever animals are used for human benefit, including for food, clothing, entertainment, sport, scientific research, education, transportation and companionship, this should be exercised responsibly, with compassion for the animals concerned, and due regard for animal welfare, including decisions on breeding and selection. Any use of animals for human benefit should minimise negative welfare impacts, promote positive experiences and work towards positive welfare outcomes for all animals involved.

**Recommendation 4:** Efforts to control wildlife should predictably and effectively cause the least animal welfare harms to the least number of animals. We support the seven consensus principles for ethical wildlife control, as described by Dubois et al. (2017)<sup>5</sup> as valuable tools for assessing the ethical considerations associated with wild-life control methods and their impact on animal welfare.

**Recommendation 5:** UK governments should reconceptualise characterisations of animal welfare in legislation. Management of welfare should not be limited to mitigating negative consequences but also promoting positive experiences and enhancing welfare. Animal welfare should therefore be defined in UK legislation in line with the Five Domains model.

**Recommendation 6:** A named individual within government should be tasked with regularly engaging with research and declaring when the evidence suggests species are sentient. This would ensure that sentient species are afforded appropriate legislative welfare protections.

**Recommendation 7:** Improving animal health and welfare should be the veterinary profession’s primary aim and motivation. The veterinary profession should provide strong and visible leadership on animal welfare at individual, community, national and international levels.

**Recommendation 8:** Veterinary schools should continue to integrate awareness and enhance training in animal welfare, science, ethics and law (AWSEL) across veterinary undergraduate curricula.

**Recommendation 9:** For the veterinary profession to justifiably position itself as animal welfare focussed, awareness and training in animal welfare advocacy at undergraduate and post-graduate level should be strengthened.

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<sup>5</sup> Dubois et al. (2017) International consensus principles for ethical wildlife control

# BVA position on animal welfare

## Introduction

Recognising animals as sentient beings provides the basis for our moral concern for the welfare of animals. Animals are living beings with the capacity to have feelings, including pain and pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

Enhancing, protecting and securing the health and welfare of animals is the fundamental purpose of the veterinary profession. Animal welfare is a rapidly evolving social concern, and the veterinary profession plays a leading role in an interdisciplinary community seeking to promote the best interests of animals and improve their treatment, wherever they are used or impacted by people.

The importance of animal welfare for veterinary surgeons is conveyed in the declaration that each veterinary surgeon makes upon admission to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons: "...ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care."

The veterinary profession has a crucial role to play in advancing of animal welfare at individual, community, national and international levels. The [BVA Animal Welfare Strategy 'Vets speaking up for animal welfare'](#) provides a framework to help vets advocate good animal welfare outcomes for all animals.

With developments in animal welfare science, we are now better able to characterise animal welfare, and frameworks for assessing and managing animal welfare have evolved.<sup>7</sup> Historically, animal welfare assessment and management has centred on identifying and minimising negative effects on animal welfare. More recently, animal welfare science has shifted towards models that strive not only to minimise negative welfare effects but also to maximise positive welfare effects. Such approaches recognise that animals used by humans should have, at least, 'a life worth living', with a growing number of animals having a 'good life'.<sup>8, 9, 10, 11</sup>

## Defining and assessing animal welfare

Animal welfare relates to an animal's physical health and mental wellbeing. The OIE defines animal welfare as 'the physical and mental state of an animal in relation to the conditions in which it lives and dies'.<sup>12</sup>

To protect, advocate and enhance animal welfare, the welfare of sentient animals should be assessed using up-to-date concepts, tools and scientific approaches. This includes awareness and

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<sup>6</sup> British Veterinary Association, 2021. BVA position on the recognition of animals as sentient beings. Available at: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/4052/bva-policy-position-on-the-recognition-of-animals-as-sentient-beings.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Mellor, D. J., 2016. Updating animal welfare thinking: Moving beyond the "five freedoms" towards "A life worth living." *Animals*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

<sup>8</sup> FVE/AVMA/CVMA, 2020. Joint AVMA-FVE-CVMA statement on the roles of veterinarians in promoting animal welfare. <https://fve.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/FVE-AVMA-CVMA-position-statement-on-animal-welfare-Clean-Version.docx.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Mellor, D. J., 2016. Updating animal welfare thinking: Moving beyond the "five freedoms" towards "A life worth living." *Animals*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

<sup>10</sup> Webster, J. (2016). Animal Welfare: Freedoms, Dominions and "A Life Worth Living." *Animals*, 6(6), 35; <https://doi.org/10.3390/>

<sup>11</sup> Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2009. Farm Animal Welfare in Great Britain: Past, Present and Future. Available at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/319292/Farm\\_Animal\\_Welfare\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain\\_-\\_Past\\_Present\\_and\\_Future.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319292/Farm_Animal_Welfare_in_Great_Britain_-_Past_Present_and_Future.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.oie.int/en/what-we-do/animal-health-and-welfare/animal-welfare/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20OIE%20Terrestrial,which%20it%20lives%20and%20die>

assessments of behaviour as both a welfare indicator and welfare determinant, and assessment of mental wellbeing.

### Five Domains

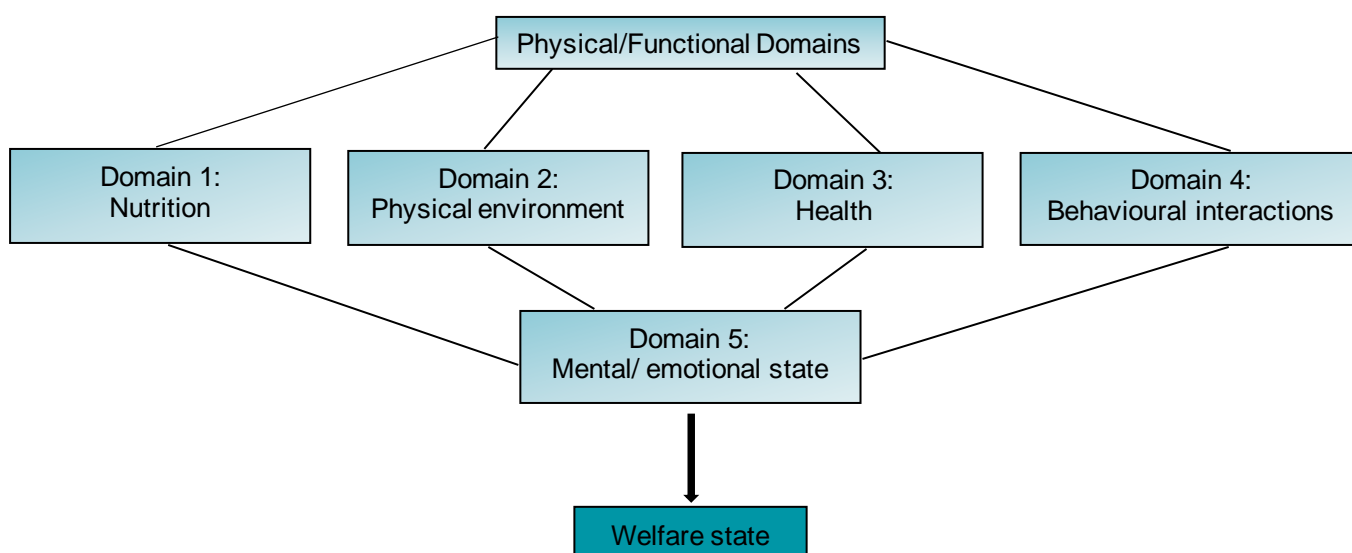
We support the Five Domains model for animal welfare assessment.<sup>13</sup> The model outlines the key elements that should be considered when assessing welfare, the importance of positive welfare states and mental wellbeing, and how the actions of humans directly impact animal welfare.

Since its inception in 1994, the model has evolved to consider developments in animal welfare science. The most recent 2020 model<sup>14</sup> centres on the following five domains:

1. Nutrition
2. Physical Environment
3. Health
4. Behavioural Interactions (including interactions with the environment, interactions with other animals, and interactions with humans)
5. Mental/emotional state

The model differs from that of the 'Five Freedoms' and 'Five Needs' by distinguishing between the physical and functional factors that influence an animal's welfare and the overall mental/emotional or 'affective' state of the animal arising from these factors (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Basic structure of the 2020 Five Domains Model<sup>15</sup>:**



Domains 1-3 largely focus on animal-care based inputs and internal survival-related factors, eg. internal imbalances or disturbances which had nutritional, environmental and health origins. Domain 4 focusses on external situation-related factors and the behavioural outputs animals demonstrate in response to their external conditions, eg. external restrictive confinement or restraint, or otherwise unusual space availability and/or negative impacts of the presence or absence of other animals

<sup>13</sup> Mellor, David J.; Beausoleil, Ngaio J.; Littlewood, Katherine E.; McLean, Andrew N.; McGreevy, Paul D.; Jones, Bidda; Wilkins, Cristina. 2020. "The 2020 Five Domains Model: Including Human–Animal Interactions in Assessments of Animal Welfare" *Animals* 10, no. 10: 1870. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani1010187>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from The 2020 Five Domains Model for Animal Welfare Assessment and Monitoring, a Poster Prepared by Horses and People Magazine, Australia. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2Es8kXe>

(including humans).<sup>16</sup> Crucially, the model emphasises that what matters to animals in terms of welfare is their subjective experiences, and that physiological mechanisms and affective (emotional) responses interact dynamically.

One of the key strengths of the Five Domains model is the clarity it provides that merely minimising or resolving negative physical or mental states does not necessarily result in positive welfare, but may only provide, at best, a neutral state.<sup>17</sup> To have a 'good life', and at least a 'life worth living', animals need more than this; they must have the opportunity to have positive experiences, such as physical health, satiation and opportunities for positive environmental and social interactions.

Recognition of mental wellbeing and the importance of positive welfare states has subsequently been widely accepted and adopted across other welfare assessment models and tools, for example the [Animal Welfare Assessment Grid](#), [FAWC's 'Good Life' framework](#), and the [Dawkins 'two questions' approach](#).

**Recommendation 1: To have a 'good life', and at least a 'life worth living', animals must have the opportunity to have positive experiences. Over time, positive experiences should outweigh negative experiences. This should encompass the whole of an animal's life.**

**Recommendation 2: To protect, advocate and enhance animal welfare, the welfare of sentient animals should be assessed using up-to-date concepts, tools and scientific approaches. This includes awareness and assessments of behaviour as both a welfare indicator and welfare determinant, and assessment of mental wellbeing.**

## Human-animal interactions

Animal health and welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human need. Humans can often influence an animal's external environment, and therefore the physical and functional factors that contribute to an animal's welfare state. This is both in terms of the environments in which we keep animals under human care, and also the environmental impact humans have on the habitat of wild animals through climate change, pollution, and incursion into habitats. In addition, human interactions with animals (eg proximity to animals, behaviour towards animals) have the potential to cause welfare-enhancing or welfare-compromising effects.<sup>18</sup>

When humans interact with animals it is therefore extremely important that they are equipped with the appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour to minimise negative experiences; assess behaviour as an indicator of mental state; encourage positive experiences and work towards positive welfare outcomes for the animal(s) concerned.

Wherever animals are used for human benefit, including for food<sup>19,20</sup>, clothing, entertainment<sup>21</sup>, sport, scientific research, education, transportation<sup>22</sup> and companionship, this should be exercised responsibly, with compassion for the animals concerned and due regard for animal welfare, including decisions on breeding and selection. Any use of animals for human benefit should minimise negative welfare impacts, promote positive experiences and work towards ensuring positive welfare states for all animals involved.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> British Veterinary Association (BVA), 2019. BVA position on UK sustainable animal agriculture. Available at: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/1181/bva-position-on-uk-sustainable-animal-agriculture-full.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> British Veterinary Association (BVA), 2020. BVA position on the welfare of animals at slaughter. Available at: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/3664/full-position-bva-position-on-the-welfare-of-animals-at-slaughter.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> British Veterinary Association (BVA) 2018. BVA Pets in advertising guidelines: A social concern. Available at: <https://www.bva.co.uk/resources-support/ethical-guidance/advertising-guidelines-pets-in-advertising-a-social-concern/>

<sup>22</sup> British Veterinary Association (BVA), 2019. BVA position on the welfare of livestock during transport. Available at: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/1176/bva-policy-position-on-the-welfare-of-livestock-during-transport-full-24519.pdf>

Where humans control wildlife to preserve public health and safety, protect property and land, or conserve other wildlife and animals, these controls should predictably and effectively cause the least animal welfare harms to the least number of animals. We support the seven consensus principles for ethical wildlife control, as described by Dubois et al. (2017)<sup>23</sup> as valuable tools for assessing the ethical considerations associated with wild-life control methods and their impact on animal welfare.

**Recommendation 3: Animal health and welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human want or need. Wherever animals are used for human benefit, including for food, clothing, entertainment, sport, scientific research, education, transportation and companionship, this should be exercised responsibly, with compassion for the animals concerned, and due regard for animal welfare, including decisions on breeding and selection. Any use of animals for human benefit should minimise negative welfare impacts, promote positive experiences and work towards positive welfare outcomes for all animals involved.**

**Recommendation 4: Efforts to control wildlife should predictably and effectively cause the least animal welfare harms to the least number of animals. We support the seven consensus principles for ethical wildlife control, as described by Dubois et al. (2017)<sup>24</sup> as valuable tools for assessing the ethical considerations associated with wild-life control methods and their impact on animal welfare.**

### Characterisation of animal welfare in UK legislation

It is recognised that sentient animals are capable of experiencing positive and negative feelings such as contentment, pain and frustration so require consideration, respect and legal protection.<sup>25</sup>

In current UK legislation, animal welfare is characterised in the UK Animal Welfare Acts through the “Five Needs”: There is a legal duty placed on all animal keepers and owners to ensure that these welfare needs are met, these are:

- the need for a suitable environment
- the need for a suitable diet
- the need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- the need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Notably the “Five Needs” do not differentiate between the functional (physical) and affective (emotional) aspects of animal welfare. Further, characterising animal welfare as a set of ‘needs’ also risk reducing the welfare responsibility of the keeper/owner to that of solely neutralising negative experiences, as opposed to encouraging positive experiences that would enhance welfare.

As highlighted above, animal welfare assessment and management should not only focus on neutralising negative experience, but also promote positive experiences and enhancements to welfare to ensure animals have a life worth living.

There is an opportunity to move animal welfare legislation in the UK from the “Five Needs” to the “Five Domains” to better reflect our current understanding of animal welfare assessment and management.<sup>26,27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dubois et al. (2017) International consensus principles for ethical wildlife control

<sup>24</sup> Dubois et al. (2017) International consensus principles for ethical wildlife control

<sup>25</sup> British Veterinary Association, 2021. BVA position on the recognition of animals as sentient beings. Available at: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/4052/bva-policy-position-on-the-recognition-of-animals-as-sentient-beings.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Mellor, D.J., 2017. Operational Details of the Five Domains Model and Its Key Applications to the Assessment and Management of Animal Welfare. *Animals*, 7, 60

<sup>27</sup> Mellor, D.J., Beausoleil, N.J., 2015. Extending the ‘Five Domains’ model for animal welfare assessment to incorporate positive welfare states. *Animal Welfare*, 24: 241-253

With this mind, the UK governments should reconceptualise characterisations of animal welfare in legislation. Management of welfare should not be limited to mitigating negative consequences but also promoting positive experiences and enhancing welfare. Animal welfare should therefore be defined in UK legislation in line with the Five Domains model.

It is also important to recognise that over the last 50 years, novel scientific methods have been employed to help determine how animals perceive the world, and to better understand their needs, preferences, pleasures and pains. This new knowledge has shown that the abilities and functioning of non-human animals are more complex than had previously been assumed. This is an active research area, and knowledge of sentience in different species continues to grow. Therefore, it is appropriate to use a definition of animal within legislation that is based on existing evidence as well as providing a mechanism to allow changes reflecting new and emerging research.

To achieve this, we recommend in the [BVA position on the recognition of animals as sentient beings](#) that there should be a named individual within government, who would be tasked with regularly engaging with research and declaring when the evidence suggests sentience exists. This would ensure that sentient species are afforded appropriate legislative welfare protections. For example, this would provide an appropriate route for species such as bees, where emerging evidence suggests a complex central nervous system and highly sophisticated units within bee colonies with an abundance of homeostatic mechanisms.

**Recommendation 5: UK governments should reconceptualise characterisations of animal welfare in legislation. Management of welfare should not be limited to mitigating negative consequences but also promoting positive experiences and enhancing welfare. Animal welfare should therefore be defined in UK legislation in line with the Five Domains model.**

**Recommendation 6: A named individual within government should be tasked with regularly engaging with research and declaring when the evidence suggests species are sentient. This would ensure that sentient species are afforded appropriate legislative welfare protections.**

### **The role of the veterinary profession in relation to animal welfare**

Enhancing, protecting and securing the health and welfare of animals is the fundamental purpose of the veterinary profession. On a day-to-day basis veterinary surgeons lead the diagnosis and treatment of injury and disease in the animals under their care. Veterinary surgeons also form part of an interdisciplinary community seeking to promote the best interests of animals and improve their treatment, wherever they are used or impacted on by people. Indeed, veterinary surgeons in the UK make a declaration upon registration that 'ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care.'

It is recognised that neither sentiments nor economic factors can be entirely divorced from animal welfare considerations, yet they should never be paramount in its consideration. It is important to emphasise that there is a limit to acceptable animal welfare compromises associated with each area of animal use. If these limits are reached and cannot be adequately addressed, the veterinary profession will oppose that use or practice.

The veterinary profession should therefore demonstrate strong and visible leadership on animal welfare. Veterinary surgeons have opportunities and responsibilities to advocate for animals' best interests at individual, community, national and international levels:

- **Individual level** - through direct contact with animal keepers and owners;
- **Community level** – veterinary practices offering animal welfare expertise through local media and educational outreach activities;
- **National level** - through veterinary associations formulating policies and lobbying; and
- **International level** - through policy formulation and advocacy, effective partnerships between national and international veterinary associations, and other international bodies and institutions.

Overall, the veterinary profession has a dual duty—to advocate for the best interests of animals under the care of individual veterinary surgeons (at individual level), as well as to advocate for changes and solutions to address the root causes of animal welfare problems (at community, national and international levels).<sup>28,29</sup>

To support vets to provide strong and visible leadership on animal welfare, BVA has developed a dedicated animal welfare strategy '[Vets speaking up for animal welfare](#)', which provides a framework to help vets advocate good animal welfare outcomes for all animals at each of these levels.

As well as animal welfare, vets also need to take into account both their own and their clients' needs, as all three are interlinked. By working with their clients and ensuring that veterinary activities are economically viable, veterinary surgeons are able to achieve their primary aim of improving animal welfare.

Vets often face conflicting duties to animals, clients, employers and their own needs. Consequently, ethical reasoning is an integral part of navigating these ethical challenges. Therefore, it is important that awareness and training in animal welfare, science, ethics and law (AWSEL) is integrated across undergraduate curricula, as well as understanding of how to communicate these considerations to the wider public. Similarly, for the veterinary profession to position itself as animal welfare focussed, awareness and training in animal welfare advocacy at undergraduate and postgraduate level should be strengthened.

**Recommendation 7: Improving animal health and welfare should be the veterinary profession's primary aim and motivation. The veterinary profession should provide strong and visible leadership on animal welfare at individual, community, national and international levels.**

**Recommendation 8: Veterinary schools should continue to integrate awareness and enhance training in animal welfare, science, ethics and law (AWSEL) across veterinary undergraduate curricula.**

**Recommendation 9: For the veterinary profession to justifiably position itself as animal welfare focussed, awareness and training in animal welfare advocacy at undergraduate and post-graduate level should be strengthened.**

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<sup>28</sup> FVE/AVMA/CVMA (2020) Joint AVMA-FVE-CVMA statement on the roles of veterinarians in promoting animal welfare. <https://fve.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/FVE-AVMA-CVMA-position-statement-on-animal-welfare-Clean-Version.docx.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> . Wensley, S., Betton, V., Martin, N. and Tipton, E. (2020). Advancing animal welfare and ethics in veterinary practice through a national pet wellbeing task force, practice-based champions and clinical audit. *Veterinary Record*, 187: 316-316. <https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.105484>