
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The OIE's role in improving animal welfare

Cleandro Pazinato Dias

Member of the OIE ad hoc Group on Animal Welfare and Pig Production Systems

The Office International des Epizooties (OIE) was founded in 1924 with the main objective of preventing the spread of animal diseases in a global scale. Although the name was changed to World Organisation for Animal Health in 2003, the acronym OIE was kept. Brazil is one of the member countries of the intergovernmental organisation, which currently accounts 181 members and it is present on all continents.

The OIE's role in improving and promoting animal welfare became more significant in 2001, when the organisation acknowledged the issue as one of the priorities in its strategic plan. The organisation recognises that health is a key element of animal welfare. Evidently, animals must be healthy to be considered in a good state of welfare. Healthier animals produce better quality products. Therefore, there is a direct link between health, welfare and food safety.

The organisation contributed greatly to our understanding of animal welfare by advocating the concept. In 2008 it developed an official definition of the term animal welfare: how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. An animal is in a good state of welfare if it is healthy, comfortable, well fed, safe, able to

express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress. Ensuring animal welfare requires disease prevention and veterinary treatment, appropriate shelter, management, nutrition, humane handling and slaughter.

In order to promote animal welfare, OIE sets out standards that had to be implemented by the member countries. The documents are designed to be applicable in different socioeconomic, cultural, and religious contexts. They are guidelines, broad and comprehensive recommendations. Animal welfare standards address how animals are handled, transported and slaughtered. It is worth highlighting that OIE is a reference to the World Trade Organization (WTO), setting rules for a secure international trade between nations. For instance, Section 7 of the Terrestrial Animal Health Code contains 12 chapters dedicated solely to animal welfare, called OIE Global Animal Welfare Standards. The chapters on welfare of pigs and laying hens are currently underway. All the papers are heavily based on scientific knowledge as well as practical experience, taking into account the concept of assessment of animal welfare indicators directly taken from the animals.