

Vision of Dutch organic dairy farmers on animal health and welfare

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Abstract

Dutch organic dairy farmers expressed their opinions on animal health and welfare in order to be able to communicate it internally (within the dairy sector) and externally (to consumers). A healthy animal in their opinion is free of physical and psychological discomfort, survives in a herd, takes enough food and behaves naturally. Disease resistance, both innate and achieved, plays a crucial role in health and welfare. Breeding should aim at health criteria and high production may even be sacrificed for good health. Prevention is more important than treatment. A diseased animal should, to some extent, be given the opportunity to recover by itself. However, needless suffering should be prevented by effective treatment, which only as a last remedy, may be antibiotics. For the assessment of suffering, the intensity and duration of pain should all be taken into account, as well as the course of the disease and its prognosis, feed and water intake, survival in the herd and body reserves. Moreover, more regulations are no guarantee for a better health and welfare. Housing, adequate feeding, care and the farmers' attitude toward his animals all contribute to animal health and welfare.

Introduction

Compared to conventional dairy husbandry, organic animals do have about the same health status (Eijck et al, 2003) and better welfare (Ruis and Pinxterhuis, 2007). Some recent developments in the Dutch organic dairy sector are the increasing farm size, scattered attention of the stockman because of other farm activities, minimizing use of antibiotics, cattle being used in order to maintain natural grassland, inclusion of feed of nature grasslands in diets, closing feed cycles and 100% organic feed (Smolders et al, 2007). On farms producing special product (i.e. organic farms) according to Dijkhuizen&Hort (1997) there will be more focus on development and application of alternative treatment. These developments might compromise animal health and welfare. For a sustainable organic dairy husbandry, regulations should include also customer safety, human welfare and economy (Noordhuizen & Metz, 2005). At the same time, focus should be more on preventive measures instead of treatment. Farmers and their advisors have questions about 'complementary' medicine, especially about their effectiveness. These developments demand a strategic vision on animal health and welfare, supported by the organic dairy sector. In order to be able to formulate such a vision, dairy farmers were invited to react on a list of questions and statements.

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Materials and methods

The statements and questions were formulated by researchers. Organic dairy farmers were asked to give their opinion about the statements and comment on the following subjects:

- an animal is healthy if it is not diseased visibly,
- antibiotics should be replaced by vaccinations,
- all new developments should be applied to fade out antibiotics,
- utmost hygiene is bad for disease resistance,
- an animal can recover by itself: but this may need some time,
- it must be possible to apply non-registered medicines,
- advisers should take into account the specific wishes of organic farmers,
- zoönoses should be monitored and control programmes should be compulsory,
- animal welfare should have more attention, but is not measurable,
- economy is more important than 'trouble free production',
- organic production is always good for the animal,
- purely home-grown feed is not good for animal health.

Statements and questions about animal health and welfare were sent by email or by paper mail to organic dairy farmers. 31 dairy farmers reacted by mail or phone and another 25 farmers gave their opinion in a meeting of the dairy farmers union "Natuurweide".

Results

Health is defined as the possibility to survive in a herd, take enough food and behave more or less natural. It is more than the absence of physical and psychological discomfort. Despite more rules aiming at a better animal welfare in organic, compared to conventional farming, this is no guarantee for a better animal health and welfare. Housing (including outdoor areas), adequate feeding, care and the farmers' attitude towards his animals will contribute to animal health and welfare. If these aspects fail, the control body should persuade or even force farmers to implement improvements.

All farmers are convinced that disease resistance plays a crucial role in the health and welfare of their animals. Animals that live long enough to develop an active immune system, should be given the opportunity to achieve that. In case of animals without this possibility or in case of diseases that cannot be overcome or cause great economic damage, vaccinations could be used to gain specific resistance.

In breeding programmes one should, besides production criteria, aim at health criteria. The general opinion is that for production without health problems, some yield may be sacrificed. The expectation is that somehow this will turn out in economic and psychological profit.

Rearing replacement animals on the farm is to be preferred above buying young animals, because of resistance against farm specific pathogens. It is important to keep the farm closed by avoiding the introduction of new animals. However, organic farmers pursue for close contacts with consumers and therefore need 'open' farms. Farmers think that, given a good disease resistance, there is no need for utmost hygiene in order to minimize the risks of pathogens to enter the farm and or move between animal groups on the farm.

Preventing animals from disease, is given priority above treatment. If an animal is diseased, it should be given the opportunity to recover by itself. If and how long this should take, depends on the disease: the infection-risk for herd mates and the prognosis for recovery. To a certain degree suffering may be part of recovering, but needless suffering should be prevented by effective treatment. In order to judge when suffering becomes needlessly, aspects should be taken into account of intensity and duration of the pain, course of the disease and chances of the animal, feed and water intake, survival in the herd and body reserves. Treatments administered must be effective and antibiotics should be administered only as a last remedy. In research more attention should be given to alternative and complementary treatments. At the same time, the 'off-label use' on commercial farms should be discouraged. Non-registered medicines are defined not only as complementary medicines (for example homeopathy) but also medicines registered for other animal species. For example, medicines approved for dairy cows might be effective in goat as well, but are not registered as such, because of the expensive procedure. The approval procedure of this last category of medicines should be facilitated. Measures for prevention and treatments according to a farm specific plan, contribute to the health and welfare of farm animals. Such a plan consists of measures to be taken in case of specific health and welfare problems. Because the consumer must be supplied with absolutely safe products, monitoring of zoonoses should also be part of this plan.

On-farm growing of feed nor organic regulations concerning animal food may hinder animal welfare. In cattle little difficulties are to be expected, but independent advisors with a large scope and good knowledge of organic farm management are needed to keep farmers alert and prevent them from organisational blindness.

Summarising statements concerning dairy cows:

- A healthy animal gleams, is active, takes enough food and is pleasant, without problems, produces enough and does not transmit diseases to offspring and herd mates.
- Banning antibiotics is not a necessity. Important is that one tries by all means to prevent the animals from getting ill. Administration of antibiotics should only be done in case of life-threatening situations.
- Administration of alternative medicines depends on the seriousness of the disorder. In life-threatening situations, only approved and registered medicines should be administered. Other disorders can be treated in a more 'natural' way.
- Utmost hygiene limits the development of the immune system. Although farmers should work hygienic, they don't need to use all kinds of products to achieve the highest hygiene standard.
- Trusting on the ability to recover by itself may be accompanied by some degree of suffering. Suffering is regarded as part of a natural healing

process. However, in case of severe pain or long periods of suffering, human intervention is needed.

- The use of non-registered medicines should be accepted only under strict conditions and directives and preferably under experimental conditions. The use of non-registered medicines is bad for the image of the dairy sector, has little or no effect and does not add anything to the health care of cows. However, a part of the farmers is positive about homeopathy.
- Advisors should take into account the specific preconditions of organic farming. Without solid and reliable advisors, not always the best decisions concerning animal feeding and animal health are being made.
- In order to guarantee animal and human health, zoönoses should be prevented. Participation in programs should be obligatory, with respect to organic starting points.
- Production without health and welfare problems justifies a somewhat lower production level and should be the starting point in dairy husbandry. If that point is reached, economics will be all right and farmers will do their job with pleasure.
- Working according to the organic production rules is not automatically good for animal welfare. In order to measure animal welfare, the following management figures could be used: mean age of the herd, number of incomplete lactations, yield, body condition score, percentage of cows with skin damages, percentage of lame cows and percentage of cows with mastitis. In behavioural studies animal welfare can be objectified.
- Growing all feed on the farm is not necessarily a risk for animal health. It depends on the type of farm and soil. However, it should be possible to give additional minerals and trace elements when shortages occur.

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