

Production diseases and farm animal welfare: what does the public think?

With intensive animal production on the rise, how do consumers relate to the systems their food comes from and so-called "production diseases"?



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Many members of the public are unfamiliar with how the food they eat is produced, including the use of modern animal production systems. The intensification of production is becoming increasingly common in modern farming. However, intensive systems are particularly susceptible to production diseases, with potentially negative consequences for farm animal welfare, such as poor health and reduced growth. Could a better understanding of how consumers relate to food systems help us to avoid this and improve trust in the food chain?

What are production diseases?

Production diseases:

- Originate from a complex interaction of the viruses and bacteria present on farms, animal genetics, and the environment in which the animal is reared, including the housing, feed and management practices used.
- Differ from epidemic diseases (such as foot and mouth disease or avian influenza) which are caused by new infections from outside the farm.
- Can occur in all types of production systems, although the frequency and scale of disease can potentially increase with the intensity of the production system used.
- Have implications for farm animal welfare through poor animal health and reduced growth.
- Have economic implications for producers, reducing animals feeding efficiency and growth rate, and so resulting in slower time to market, and additional costs for treating the diseases.
- Pose a constant risk to both animal welfare and profits. However, the implementation of proactive measures to prevent them can also prove costly.

Why do public perceptions of production diseases matter?

Previous research has demonstrated the public is concerned about farm animal welfare, yet little is known about public attitudes towards production diseases, and interventions to reduce these diseases. A better understanding of public perceptions from industry and policy stakeholders can encourage:

- Increased consumer trust in animal production systems.
- Better alignment between intensive farming practices and interventions, and the values, needs and expectations of society.
- Improved relationships between consumers, retailers and suppliers.

What new evidence do we have from the research?

Although the public sees the benefits of intensive production for consumers (reduced costs and increased availability of animal products), the research carried out across five European countries (Finland, Germany, Poland, Spain and the UK) identified that:

- The public has concerns about modern animal production methods as they think they may breach the two core concepts essential to good animal welfare: humane treatment and naturalness.
- The use of antibiotics, and the related issue of antimicrobial resistance, which could have implications for human health, are seen as problematic.
- All stakeholders involved with modern farming were viewed as responsible for animal health and welfare. This includes regulatory bodies, producers, veterinarians and even members of the public.
- Despite their concerns, the public perceives intensive systems as having benefits, primarily "anthropocentric" benefits (ie benefits to humans), such as reducing cost and increasing availability of animal-based products.
- Shoppers are mostly unaware of where the animal products they consume come from, with the majority not attributing their purchases of animal products to having origins in intensive production systems.



What actions do stakeholders need to take to overcome public concerns?

It is important to address the mistrust and misconceptions of consumers about production systems and issues such as production diseases. Otherwise these may conflict with public values and expectations, resulting in poor animal welfare and threats to human livelihoods.

Policy makers should consider:

- Designing regulation to reduce, and provide more control over, the use of antibiotics. This should be communicated to the public as part of increased transparency to help address public concerns.
- Ensuring that the animal welfare legislation in place also addresses the concerns of those who do not purchase animal products eg vegetarians and vegans.
- Developing more formalised links between legislation and public perceptions such as consultations and surveys, with regular review processes, to ensure appropriate minimum standards are in place, as public perceptions and preferences change over time.
- Guidance on clearer labelling of animal products to provide consumers with more information to help consumer decision making.

Producers should consider:

- Working with independent and trusted bodies such as animal welfare organisations and quality assurance schemes to raise standards.
- The preference of consumers for the most "proactive" interventions to address production diseases, namely improved housing and hygiene measures.
- Providing information at industry level about when and why antibiotics or more reactive interventions are used, to help allay public concerns about human health and safety.
- Communicating transparent information to consumers by using company websites to convey information to those who wish to proactively seek it out, and being open to actively engage in communications with consumers.
- Working with the media to highlight good practice, including examples of proactive management measures being used to prevent production diseases.
- Promoting better supply chain co-ordination and co-operation to ensure that all stakeholders are working together to support each other and convey consistent and accurate messages to the public to improve public trust.

Project information

PROHEALTH is the largest European animal health project ever funded to help combat production diseases of pigs and poultry. The PROHEALTH project is developing an understanding of the multi-factorial dimension of animal pathologies linked to the intensification of production and use this to develop, evaluate and disseminate effective control strategies to reduce impact.

This Policy and Practice Note was written by Dr Beth Clark.
Contact: beth.clark@ncl.ac.uk

Co-investigators:

Professor Lynn Frewer, Professor of Food and Society, Newcastle University, UK

Professor Ilias Kyriazakis, Professor of Animal Health and Nutrition, Newcastle University, UK

Dr Luca Panzone, Lecturer in Consumer Behaviour, Newcastle University, UK

Professor Jarkko Niemi, Professor of Economics and Animal Health, Natural Resources Institute Finland

Dr Terhi Latvala, Senior Scientist, Natural Resources Institute Finland

Dr Gavin Stewart, Lecturer in Evidence Synthesis Methods, Newcastle University, UK

Professor Richard Tranter, Professor of Rural Economy and Director of Centre for Agricultural Strategy, University of Reading, UK

Philip Jones, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Agricultural Strategy, University of Reading, UK

Twitter: @fp7_PROHEALTH

Website: www.fp7-prohealth.eu

Further information

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