Applying science to animal welfare

Kevin Doerr, BA*

College of Veterinary Medicine, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN
*Corresponding author: Kevin Doerr (doerrkr@purdue.edu)
doi.org/10.2460/ajvr.24.02.0034

Nothing stirs emotions quite like the topic of animal welfare. For the past decade, the Purdue University Center for Animal Welfare Science (CAWS), led by Candace Cronen, PhD, has provided illuminating insights on the subject by focusing on understanding what is best for animals based on their needs, interests, and responses. The Center’s approach relies on rigorous application of science and ethics, through research, scholarly discussion, and conferences, as well as collaborative engagement that seeks out and accentuates common ground between key stakeholders.

As a professor of animal behavior and well-being, Dr. Cronen holds a joint appointment in the College of Veterinary Medicine and the College of Agriculture. “CAWS aims to address contentious social issues in animal welfare, inform policy development, and explore the broad effects of the human-animal bond, our obligations to animals, and their evolving roles in society,” Dr. Cronen said. In recognition of her exceptional dedication and contributions to the field of animal welfare, Dr. Cronen received the 2023 AVMA Humane Award.

Formally established in 2014 with the joint support of the Colleges of Veterinary Medicine and Agriculture, CAWS builds on a rich history of agricultural animal behavior and welfare research at Purdue dating back to the early 1980s and the pioneering work of Dr. Jack Albright, professor of animal sciences, on dairy cow handling, management, and welfare. The scope later expanded to a much broader array of species and specialties, including poultry well-being, laboratory animal welfare, and studies of human-animal interaction directed by Dr. Alan Beck through the Center for the Human-Animal Bond, housed in the College of Veterinary Medicine. These collective developments enabled Purdue to connect scholars in agricultural and companion and laboratory animal welfare sciences with social science expertise in ethics, psychology, policy, and economics.

The breadth and depth of the areas of expertise represented in the center facilitate research that sheds light on myriad animal welfare issues and provides a source of independent insight that can bring together people with differing perspectives. Examples of Purdue’s animal welfare science research include the work of Dr. Janice Kritchevsky, professor of large animal internal medicine, which has contributed significantly to equine welfare. Studies by Dr. Nicole Widmar, professor of agricultural economics, have furthered our understanding of consumer perceptions, behavior, and people’s willingness to pay for assurances about animal welfare. Dr. Luiz Brito, associate professor of animal sciences, and Dr. Kari Ekenstedt, assistant professor of basic medical sciences, have helped to enhance understanding of the roles that genetics and genetic markers play in improving animal welfare outcomes. Drs. Marisa Erasmus, Darrin Karcher, and Greg Fraley, all associate professors of animal sciences, have placed Purdue in a leadership role with their studies of poultry welfare and its translation to producers who raise and care for birds.

Sharing scientific data and research findings in an accessible manner provides a basis for building bridges to improve animal welfare while fostering productive collaboration among diverse stakeholders, who include farmers, food and agricultural sector leaders, pet industry representatives, dog breeders, animal sheltering and welfare leaders, and members of the public. Research findings are shared in conferences and symposia, such as the CAWS Symposium and Canine Welfare Science Forum.

Through these accomplishments, significant progress has been made in improving animal welfare for multiple species. A key example is Canine Care Certified, a Purdue program that sets rigorous science-based and expert-reviewed requirements for dog breeders, providing a means for responsible breeders to gain recognition for their exemplary practices and dedication to animal welfare. Since 2013 when Dr. Cronen created the initial standards of care, 215 breeders have become certified, 117 of whom are in Indiana, with 360 more working toward certification. The Indiana legislature is even considering requiring brokers and pet stores that sell source dogs from commercial breeders to use only those who meet Canine Care Certified standards. Through innovative, interdisciplinary scholarship, Purdue is utilizing the light of research to advance animal welfare.

© 2024 THE AUTHORS. Published by the American Veterinary Medical Association as an Open Access article under Creative Commons CCBY-NC license.