

Equine welfare assessment and feedback to owners

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To assess horse welfare and develop a system for feedback to horse owners is the aim of the present study. A protocol developed in line with the Welfare Quality® project was used to assess 26 stables and 497 horses. Questionnaires were used to investigate what kind of feedback horse owners wanted and where they currently got their questions about horse welfare answered. The questionnaire was sent to participating stables and made available to the public via websites and social media.

Questionnaires revealed that 38% retrieved information from popular science articles, 77% from discussions with peers while 8% generally perceived their peers to lack knowledge on horse welfare. Factors affecting decision making were horse health (85%) and economy (38%). 85% wanted exhaustive information and advice on improvements, 69% preferred to get feedback as a digital document and 92% were interested in benchmarking.

Answers from participating stables lead to the development of a feedback consisting of results, scientific background of used measures, copies of assessment protocols for each horse, supportive telephone calls regarding decision making and benchmarking from all participating stables.

Questionnaires to the public had 688 respondents of which 54% were amateur riders/drivers. Main questions respondents regarding horse welfare were within feeding regimes (62%), housing (57%) and field size (54%). Main motivational factors in decision making were horse health (83%) and behavioural problems (71%).

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81% got information about horse welfare and support for changes from discussions with peers and 63% based decisions on their own personal opinion. 91% were interested in benchmarking scores to compare themselves with other stables.

The results highlight the need for independent assessment and feedback with a scientific base to horse owners. This will enable horse owners to make informed decisions with a scientific background that will result in increased horse welfare.

Lay persons message

A developed protocol was used to assess horse welfare and horse owners were questioned regarding how they wanted the results presented. This resulted in the development of a feedback system that will aid horse owners to make informed decisions about horse welfare.