Development and assessment of animal-based welfare indicators at the slaughterhouse for monitoring cattle welfare

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A very recent scientific opinion of EFSA on the welfare assessment of dairy cows concluded that animal-based welfare indicators, identified on the basis of scientific evidence, can be effectively used in the evaluation of the welfare of dairy cattle on farm in relation to laws, codes of practice, quality assurance schemes and management. Some of these animal-oriented (instead of resource-oriented) measures are applicable for ante-mortem or post-mortem inspection and thus can be taken at the slaughterhouse. The identification, development and assessment of such objective indicators that are easily and reliably to record on a nationwide basis meets a political demand (e.g. EU strategy for the Protection & Welfare of animals 2012-15). Little work in this area has been dedicated to cattle so far, thus our study aims to develop and assess animal-based welfare indicators for calves, beef and dairy cows recordable at slaughter. In a first step, we carried out a questionnaire based survey among Swiss veterinarians working in slaughter animal inspection and meat control to integrate their opinion on prevalence and feasibility on a list of indicators derived from literature review and expert opinion. In a second step, we carried out a continuous data collection over one year in two of the largest Swiss cattle slaughterhouses and developed simple, rapid, repeatable scoring systems for the assessment of the potential indicators (ongoing). A third step will validate the significance of the indicators by tracing back from our slaughterhouse findings to the situations on the farms of origin. Such indicators, collected nationwide, stored in a central system and analyzed on farm level could be used for categorization of farms with respect to welfare quality and be implemented in the frame of planning risk-based official welfare controls on farms. The ongoing work, current results, and a preliminary repertory of indicators will be presented.