

Viewpoint

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The need to include animal protection in public health policies Open

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Abstract

Many critical public health issues require non-traditional approaches. Although many novel strategies are used, one approach not widely applied involves improving the treatment of animals. Emerging infectious diseases are pressing public health challenges that could benefit from improving the treatment of animals. Other human health issues, that overlap with animal treatment issues, and that warrant further exploration, are medical research and domestic violence. The diverse nature of these health issues and their connection with animal treatment suggest that there may be other similar intersections. Public health would benefit by including the treatment of animals as a topic of study and policy development.

Keywords:

animals; public health; animal treatment; emerging infectious diseases; medical research; domestic violence

Introduction

Environmental hazards, stagnation of drug development, climate change, human population growth, emerging infectious diseases (EIDs), world hunger, and violence are among our most urgent public health concerns. Their multifactorial roots necessitate strategies that go well beyond the traditional health sector. One strategy that has been largely neglected and that can help address several of these issues involves improving the treatment of non-human animals (hereafter ‘animals’). I briefly describe how EIDs are connected with the treatment of animals and discuss why this connection needs to be addressed in public health strategies. I describe other areas of exploration, including issues concerning domestic violence and medical research.

Emerging Infectious Diseases

Since 1980, more than 35 infectious diseases have emerged and 87 human pathogens have been discovered, an average rate of about three new pathogens each year.^{1, 2} Of the 175 human pathogens that have been classified as emerging or re-emerging, three-fourths come from animals.³ Several factors contribute to the increase in EIDs, including environmental changes and human population growth. Changes in animal agriculture and growth of the wildlife trade also contribute to the increase in emerging infections.

Animal farming

Each year, more than 64 billion animals are raised and killed for food globally.⁴ Largely because of increased demand for animal products, intensive animal operations have mostly replaced traditional farming practices worldwide, particularly for pigs and poultry.⁵ The stress and distress associated with these new farming conditions heightens animals’ vulnerability to disease. A report published by the Pew Commission highlights how close contact of animals facilitates the exchange and evolution of pathogens and how stress induced by dense confinement increases the likelihood of infection and illness in animals.⁶ Pathogens circulating in these animal populations may lead to human illnesses.

For centuries, the evolution of the influenza virus had remained relatively stable.^{7, 8, 9} In recent years, however, the virus has undergone an evolutionary surge, with new variants emerging rapidly. The intensive confinement of animals is shown to be a major contributor to this surge.^{9, 10} Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1, first isolated in the Guangdong Province of China in 1996, is one of the most notable pathogens to appear recently.^{11, 12}