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Social Determinants of Animal Health: Cultural Norms and Beliefs

Definition and Relevance

Members of the same culture share certain values, attitudes, and beliefs which shape how they interact with the world around them. These norms can differ widely across cultural groups and may be based on tradition or may have religious significance.

Canada is a multicultural country with a wide range of beliefs and practices, some from Indigenous communities, others brought in via immigration from around the world. Some of these cultural norms and beliefs relate to the use and care of animals

(<https://utppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3138/jvme.0317-047r>, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4093044/>). What may be considered appropriate treatment of animals in one culture may differ in another culture; for example, the Hindu belief that cows are sacred beings which deserve special treatment compared to other animals

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/how-a-glencoe-ont-cow-named-mr-moo-brought-joy-and-blessings-to-a-couple-from-india-1.6202032>), which can be compared to the predominant use of cows in agriculture in Western culture. In many Indigenous cultures of

Canada, hunting of animals is seen as a traditional practice with many associated rituals, including whole-animal utilization

(<https://cssspnql.com/en/hunting-fishing-and-trapping-a-tradition-that-is-still-very-much-alive/>). This cultural practice has influenced animal welfare policy; across Canada, the practice of hunting is a constitutionally protected Aboriginal right

(<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/parks-culture-heritage-and-sport/hunting-trapping-and-angling/treaty-and-aboriginal-rights-for-hunting-and-fishing>). This policy is significant because it demonstrates the strong influence of Aboriginal culture on Canadian policy compared to other immigrant cultures. Additionally, animal caregivers from other cultures might feel discriminated against which can

influence whether or not they seek animal care

(<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/veterinary-science/articles/10.3389/fvets.2025.1602950/full>). This report aims to evaluate the importance of cultural norms and beliefs as a social determinant influencing animal health and welfare in Canada by analyzing the responsibility of different members of the community (such as caregivers, veterinary professionals, the government) and by reviewing the legislature in Canada which either supports or challenges existing cultural practices or beliefs.

Responsibility Analysis

In multicultural societies like Canada, veterinarians often face challenges related to the cultural and religious beliefs of their clients. These beliefs can influence animal care and production practices. It's the owner's responsibility to communicate their beliefs clearly, while veterinarians must strive to adapt their standard of care to respect these values without compromising animal welfare. The two biggest obstacles we found in research were certain religions viewing animals as sacred and protected, or dietary beliefs for people and animals that will affect our animals from a production standpoint. Although vets should prioritize evidence-based care, we must also accommodate client preferences and may refuse procedures that conflict with our own values. Balancing professional standards with diverse cultural beliefs is complex but essential.

Legislation Review

After reviewing Canadian legislation, we found that there was some support for cultural norms and beliefs. This was particularly clear in the support of indigenous hunting rights federally and provincially. Although some parts of legislation are influenced by cultural norms and beliefs, there are still many deficits. In particular, we found conflict between animal welfare and cultural practices. This was highlighted by the stark contrast between the rules of ritual slaughter and the requirement for stunning in Canada. Additionally, legislation could be better defined around cultural practices and beliefs. For example, the Manitoba Animal Care Act states that while inflicting suffering, serious injury or harm, or extreme anxiety or distress to an animal is prohibited, certain activities are an exception which include those designated by regulations as acceptable. This seems to position legislation as precedent-setting and adds a subjective component to it. We had a couple key takeaways from searching through the literature: (1) It was difficult to find clear literature regarding culture and beliefs and (2) legislation can be clarified in many areas to better reflect the diverse topics covered by culture norms and beliefs.

Public Education Output

For our public education output, we created an easily-accessible jeopardy game that can be played by the general public: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1wCKimVEroY_EPNvqN5LXVSEDY5Hdk-X51EgqlrDIGzl/edit?slide=id.p#slide=id.p.