

End of life care for animals at an Ahimsa Farm

The word *Ahimsa* is a Sanskrit word which means non-harm or non-violence. Applied in a modern dairy setting, we use the term to mean *non-slaughter*.

Non-violence, compassion and protection are axiomatic principles upon which this policy has been established.

Non-slaughter also implies that animals on the Ahimsa farm will never enter the food chain for human or, for that matter, animal consumption.

The Ahimsa Farm and its staff are aware that, since animals live at the farm throughout their lives, the animals will usually die on the farm. This policy sets out how we will treat animals as they approach their end of life, so that they may die in comfort and with dignity.

Principles

We have adopted the following six principles for how we will care for our animals at the end of life:

1. Our animals have a right to life.

As far as possible, our animals will die naturally on our farms, surrounded by their family of bovine companions and human friends.

The definition of natural death is when an animal dies due to an internal factor that causes the body to shut down, such as an infection, disease or disorder, or clearly approaching the end of its life through the aging process. In such cases palliative treatment to ease the pain is entirely appropriate.

In the event of illness and injury, all reasonable efforts will be made to restore our animals to good health and preserve life. The principle is that the lives of our animals are afforded the same value as human family members would. As time goes on, we would expect the skills and facilities of Ahimsa Farm to improve and expand the scope of what is reasonable, e.g. expertise in treating fractures.

2. Each animal is treated as an individual:

- The animal probably does not understand that they might die soon, but is certainly aware of how they feel, both physically and psychologically.
- We will make sure that we monitor the animal properly, so we are aware of their physical and psychological condition, and therefore aware when it changes.
- We will maximise the animal's independence and social participation to the extent that they wish, and if the animal expresses clear wishes, however, (eg to go outside, to be alone, to be with companions) we will facilitate those.

3. Palliative care will be provided:

- We will use qualified vets to ensure expert palliative care is provided to relieve pain and its symptoms and from distress and trauma.
- The animal may become distressed, and we will do as much as possible to relieve that distress - see Principle 5 below.
- We will ensure that care of the animal is coordinated, in particular by appointing a single named individual as primary carer, who will be there as much as possible and always when someone else (unknown to the animal, eg a vet) is with the animal.
- so far as possible we will ensure that someone is with the animal at all times, day and night.

4. Appointment of a guardian.

- Where an animal reaches the end of life, we will appoint a guardian to make decisions on behalf of the animal together with the primary carer.
- The role of the guardian, so far as possible, is to make decisions that the animal would make if they could understand fully what was happening.
- The guardian may decide that the animal's situation is such that they (the animal) would prefer not to have on going intervention or treatment, in which case medical treatment will be adjusted to facilitate a comfortable and painless progression of the ailment to its ultimate natural conclusion. This could include a situation where the animal is unable to move, and likely to remain immobile (even though the situation is not end-of-life as such).
- The guardian would need to consider both the physical and emotional state of the animal and look for indicators to that end.

It should be made clear that Ahimsa does not consider euthanasia to be an option of medical treatment any more than it is for humans in the UK. However, the termination of life is sometimes required in extreme situations. Therefore, all of the following criteria must be met for euthanasia to be acceptable:

- a) Zero chance of recovery.
- b) The cow is experiencing intense pain or disability, and pain relief measures are ineffective.
- c) The symptoms prevent the cow from maintaining a reasonable standard of living.
- d) To compensate for the cow's inability to consent and in order to consider the various factors of each individual scenario the unanimous consent of the guardian, a qualified vet, and an employee of the Ahimsa farm would be required.
- e) The euthanasia itself must be conducted with as minimal pain as possible, by a qualified person.

5. The Five Freedoms & Five Provisions

Table 1

The Five Freedoms and Five Provisions for promoting farm animal welfare [[12](#),[13](#),[14](#)].

Freedoms	Provisions
1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition	By providing ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
2. Freedom from discomfort and exposure	By providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area
3. Freedom from pain, injury, and disease	By prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
4. Freedom from fear and distress	By ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering
5. Freedom to express normal behaviour	By providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind

We do not believe that any of the above are being compromised if one considers dying naturally as 'normal behaviour'.

6. Compliance with the UK welfare laws.

The care given to the animal will at all times be fully compliant with the UK welfare laws.

It should be noted that compliance with UK welfare laws is seen as the bare minimum for the Ahimsa Farm and its staff with regards to the end-of-life care provided for their animals – especially since the key UK welfare law, the Animal Welfare Act 2006, does not contain any specific provisions on end of life care for animals or an animal's right to life.

Case studies/examples

The following case studies/examples are intended to set down specific theoretical scenarios and how we would expect to deal with each of them.

Case 1:

Situation

The animal has blood results showing CK>16,000 and/or AST>900 indicating <5% chance of recovery.

How we will deal with the situation

We will only be aware of this after having had an initial vet visit and blood samples taken. The cause of this is not outlined in this case.

If these results are due to old age, it can be presumed that the individual in question is already situated in sick bay and is no longer able to stand without mechanical assistance.

Therefore, they will already be, and will continue to be, receiving whatever care is required to reduce pain and suffering until they pass naturally.

In the case of an injury, the severity of an injury would need to be assessed. It should be noted that our individuals will not be entering the food chain and so stronger pain relief medication would be administered to reduce pain and suffering until they pass naturally.

Case 2:

Situation:

The animal has secondary trauma to eyes/skin or secondary infections (mastitis/pneumonia etc) becoming unmanageable.

How we will deal with the situation

We will use natural treatments and remedies at all times – a separate list will be made available (these may require differing timelines depending on the condition and its severity). If these prove to be ineffective, then, in partnership with the vet we will adapt the care plan to include a new medicine regime as necessary.

If the particular herd member shows no sign of recovery and their situation worsens, then, they will receive whatever care is required to reduce pain and suffering until they pass naturally.

Case 3:

Situation

The animal has been 5 days duration of recumbency after which clinical evidence significantly supports limited response to further treatment and the Five Freedoms are being compromised with regards to animal welfare.

How we will deal with the situation

- The animal will be mechanically lifted / turned on a regular basis, timings as per the care plan set out for that particular individual and adjusted as necessary as the situation develops.
- Any complications that develop due to an extended period of recumbency will be managed in partnership with the vet, who will already be involved.
- Again, if full recovery is unobtainable, the care plan will be adapted to merge into end-of-life care. See Table 1 above. We do not believe that any are being compromised if one considers dying naturally as 'normal behaviour'.

Case 4:

Situation

The animal has been down for more than 24 hours and is not responding to on farm nursing care & initial treatment.

How we will deal with the situation

- We will arrange for an initial vet visit and examination - vets to take and submit to external laboratory blood samples for muscle damage prognostic indicators (AST/CK) at earliest opportunity.
- Care plan drawn up, shared, and agreed with all parties involved.
- Vets will only be able to provide NSAID pain relief at this stage.
- Ahimsa staff will provide appropriate nursing/rolling/lifting etc to prevent secondary problems. Vets will make repeat daily visits for further assessment/pain relief - to reduce suffering whilst awaiting blood results/clinical response.
- off label medicines to be used if required (no individuals or milk are for human consumption) IV Butorphanol initially/progressing to Methadone (which will need contact/approval by APHA this stage) if required.
- The individual will be mechanically lifted / turned on a regular basis, timings as per the care plan set out for that particular individual and adjusted as necessary as the situation develops.
- Any complications that develop due to an extended period of recumbency will be managed in partnership with the vet, who will already be involved.
- Again, if full recovery is unobtainable, the care plan will be adapted to merge into end-of-life care.

Case 5

Situation

The adult animal has palpable/obvious limb fractures

How we will deal with the situation

- Some fractures in adult cattle are repairable leading to full recovery.
- The approach to be taken in this scenario depends on the location and severity of the fracture, as well as the age and size of the animal. As explained by Steiner and Anderson (2009), femoral fractures can pose a serious risk to mature cattle, mainly due to their weight. Still, some of these fractures can be successfully treated with cross-pins or screws, and others may even respond simply to stall rest. In calves, for example, stack pinning of the femur has a good prognosis, healing within around 6 weeks after surgery. Therefore, we would explore every option available to repair the fractured limb.

[Adrian Steiner, David E. Anderson, in [Food Animal Practice \(Fifth Edition\)](#), 2009 ']

Case 6

Situation

The animal has spinal cord damage with a lack of deep pain sensation (no response to foot pinch/no rectal tone)

How we will deal with the situation

- We will consider the animals' disposition in such a scenario. Paralysis of this kind may have a grave psychological effect on an animal especially if it is otherwise young and healthy, no longer being able to exhibit 'normal behaviour' (see Table 1 - The Five Freedoms).
- The animal will be mechanically lifted / turned on a regular basis, timings as per the care plan set out for that particular individual and adjusted as necessary as the situation develops.
- Any complications that develop due to an extended period of recumbency will be managed in partnership with the vet, who will already be involved.
- Again, if full recovery is unobtainable, the care plan will be adapted to merge into end-of-life care, meeting the standards outlined in Table 1 above.

Case 7

Situation

The animal has an injury and external factors are leading to further trauma to the animal, preventing treatment or endangering human safety - eg animals stuck on fences/in water/on railway lines

How we will deal with the situation

- If no other option is available and attempting to treat the individual would result in their immediate and/or painful death, OR, endangering human safety, then the decision should be made to bring about a rapid and painless death.
- An example of human endangerment may be when a horned animal keeps breaking out of corrals or fenced fields and attacking humans with view to gouge or injure them.

[However, it should be noted that by far this is likely to be an exceptional situation rather than the norm.]