BACKGROUND

Attitudes regarding cruelty and animal welfare vary widely between people, nations, and cultures, and they change through time. For example, bear-baiting and cock-fighting are now banned in the UK, but in a previous era were standard sporting fare for the British masses; fox hunting with hounds is legal to this day (albeit under pressure from lobby groups to stop); hot-iron branding of cattle is commonplace in many countries, but banned in others; and dogs and horses are bred for human consumption in some countries, whereas eating “man’s best friend” is considered anathema in others. Increasingly, in many countries, there is a growing acceptance that our dominion over animals—whether they be wild, farmed, working or companion and pet—requires that we have responsibility for their welfare. This is seen as being particularly the case for animals and birds that have the power to feel pain. Generally, it is accepted that all vertebrates are sentient. However, while most of those who are concerned about animal welfare do not place animal suffering on a par with human suffering, they do seek, increasingly, to educate others that humans have the responsibility for minimizing pain and distress in the lives of sentient animals. (An excellent synopsis of a wide range of animal welfare issues can be found in Spedding’s Animal Welfare.)

The increasing level of consumer consciousness about animal welfare issues is not restricted to a thin seam of activists in one part of the world; it is particularly characteristic of developed Western countries. Writing in the U.S., Halverson indicates “initiatives (in the latter part of the twentieth century) on behalf of animal welfare and animal rights may
mark the beginning of a sea change in the value structure of Western society. Indications are that a new social imperative regarding the human-animal relationship is forming... (as a result of) a more intuitively caring view of non-human animals and, indeed, of the natural environment itself, in recognition of the interdependence of living things” (Halverson).

LEGISLATION AND ANIMAL WELFARE: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Many countries have long had legislation in place to protect animals from the cruelty of their owners or users. In the UK, examples include the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876, and the Protection of Animals Act, 1911. Typically, such laws were promulgated to protect the interests of “working” animals such as hackney carriage horses in Victorian times, and animals that are used in scientific experiments and product testing. The use of animals in science is controlled by the Home Office acting under the authority of The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, 1986. The Act establishes “rules and guidelines for breeding, housing and husbandry of laboratory animals and (enforces) provisions for day-to-day animal care and veterinary supervision of health and welfare. In this regard, it confers better protection for animals in laboratories than on the farm” (Webster). In this chapter, however, the specific focus is on animal welfare issues that are associated with the production of livestock products for human consumption such as meat, milk and other dairy products, and eggs.

In the UK, public concern about the welfare of farm animals, particularly broiler chickens, veal calves, and pigs, was elevated in the mid-1960s through the publication of Ruth Harrison's book, Animal Machines—the New Factory Farming Industry. She posed the uncomfortable questions: “How far have we the right to take our domination of the animal world? Have we the right to rob them of all pleasure in life simply to make more money more quickly out of their carcasses? Have we the right to treat living creatures solely as food converting machines? At what point do we acknowledge cruelty?” Public response to her findings prompted the government of the day to launch the Brambell Committee in 1965 “to inquire into the welfare of animals kept under intensive livestock husbandry systems.” The Committee recommended that “existing animal welfare legislation does not adequately safeguard farm animals and a new Act is needed...Steps should be taken to ensure that (the intention of the legislation) is not prejudiced by imports of food produced under unacceptable systems (in third countries).” The Committee proposed that all farm animals should have, as a minimum, the freedom to stand up, lie down, turn around, groom