The Welfare of Animals and Its Relevance to Our Health

We must fight against the unconscious cruelty with which we treat animals...Until he extends the circle of compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.

—Dr Albert Schweitzer

Our common fate

Whether humans will ever find peace is up for conjecture, but this book aims to demonstrate that until we improve the welfare of non-human animals, we will never find health. For many involved in the health field, this proclamation will come as a great surprise. For others, it might be viewed as approaching heresy. How could the medical field, which is charged with the enormous responsibility of promoting human health and alleviating our suffering, also be concerned about the welfare of animals? It may be argued that animal welfare has nothing to do with human health, or even, more broadly, with human welfare. Yet, the notion that the way in which we treat animals impacts our own welfare is not a new one. Philosophers, scientists and other thinkers, dating from ancient Greece to modern times, have long suggested that when we disregard the welfare of other animals it may come back to haunt us in one way or another. The list of such thinkers is long and includes distinguished names such as Pythagoras, Plutarch, Socrates, Albert Einstein, St Francis of Assisi, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Much of these earlier reflections were speculation, but today there is mounting evidence of a very real, and often very direct, relationship between animal welfare and human welfare, most specifically with regard to human health. While this book will focus mostly on human
health, other aspects of human welfare (such as freedom from violence, crime and hunger) that have been connected with human health and animal welfare will also be explored. For instance, as shown by the opening quote, Schweitzer suggested that the poor treatment of animals can result in the inability of humans to find peace. Moreover, a connection has been made between cruelty toward animals and violence toward humans. This book will demonstrate how our health can be greatly influenced, positively or negatively, by how we choose to treat animals. By taking a look at some recent, highly publicized events that have threatened human health and welfare, a better picture of how human health and animal welfare are connected can be formed.

For instance, Chapter 4 will describe how, in 2003, avian influenza (H5N1 strain) spread swiftly across poultry farms in Asia and jumped the species barrier to infect humans, raising red flags that the next pandemic could originate from animal farms.1 When, in 2009, swine (H1N1 strain) influenza swept across the globe, it was confirmed that animal agriculture can play a significant role in the emergence of new strains of influenza viruses. Animals, living in profoundly filthy and crowded conditions that severely compromise their welfare and their immune systems, are now predominantly raised for food in ‘factory farms’ or confined animal-feeding operation. This creates perfect breeding grounds for new infectious diseases that are potentially deadlier than those already witnessed.

Another way in which human health and animal welfare are connected can be seen in the responses of people during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The world watched live television as many Louisiana residents refused to evacuate their homes in the wake of the hurricane and, in some cases, risked death to avoid losing their companion animals (who were not permitted on Coast Guard rescue vehicles or welcome in local shelters). Some 44 percent of those who refused to evacuate did so because they did not want to leave their animals behind.2 Indeed, the most common reason people return to evacuation sites is to rescue their pets.3 Post-Katrina studies show that the loss of these companions worsened the mental trauma many people experienced.4 This was a wake-up call for public health and rescue agencies throughout the world to take the human–animal bond seriously and incorporate animal rescue into emergency plans, since not doing so puts human health and welfare at risk (not to mention the health and welfare of the companion animals in question).

In 2007, a worldwide recall of pet food that had been exported from China and was contaminated with melamine was ordered after possibly thousands of animals fell ill or died.5 In addition to the public