

Western Morning News

The Voice of the Westcountry

Striking a balance on animal welfare

YOU have only to look at the soaring sales of free range eggs to see that public opposition to battery farming is growing apace. A decade ago fewer than five per cent of the ten billion eggs consumed every year in Britain were free range. Today that figure has gone up to 23 per cent.

But that doesn't mean the egg industry can easily cope with a Government directive to effectively outlaw all battery cages. More than three quarters of our eggs are still produced that way and battery hens' eggs are around 30p per half dozen cheaper than free range. That means they're always likely to be in demand.

Yet the Government has pulled the rug from beneath poultry farmers by announcing its strong support for a battery cage ban. Animal Welfare Minister Elliot Morley has announced a period of consultation on the issue but has made it very clear that he personally favours not only a ban on small battery cages – which are due to be outlawed across Europe over the next ten years – but also an end to the use of so called "enriched" battery cages, which give the birds a perch and a little more room.

There is no dispute that keeping hens in tiny battery cages is undesirable. The natural way of life for a chicken involves scratching around in a field with a flock of other birds and bedding down at night in a properly protected hen house. But idealism has got to be tempered with realism if Britain's important poultry industry is to survive and stay competitive in the coming years.

And it is simply unrealistic, in a short time scale, to force the closure of all battery farms and still maintain a viable egg-producing industry.

In an open market, which is what our egg producers must work within, egg buyers can go elsewhere to get eggs at the right price if they aren't being produced at home.

If Mr Morley gets his way and battery cages of all types are declared illegal in Britain in the next few years, are all the supermarkets going to accept that the price of their eggs will have to rise? Or are they going to go abroad for their eggs because countries like France continue to allow battery farming, in the larger "enriched" cages, to continue?

Anyone who knows supermarkets and their highly competitive pricing policies, knows the answer to that question without much debate. They'll go abroad.

Here in the Westcountry we produce many millions of free range eggs. Our farmers are well ahead of the rest of the country in shifting to free range and other hen-friendly egg production methods.

But we also have some of the biggest battery farms to be found anywhere in the country. They create a large number of jobs and earn a sizeable amount for the region. Their future could be in jeopardy as a result of these proposals.

And this is not the first time we've seen New Labour embrace animal health initiatives without thinking through the wider impact. We saw it with the banning of sow stalls and the result was the virtual destruction of our pig producing industry and a big switch by the supermarkets to pork produced outside of Britain, where the stalls were still permitted, keeping costs down.

With that case and with these new measures to outlaw battery cages for hens, the Government is acting out of an entirely laudable motive to improve animal welfare and give consumers food produced under the best possible conditions. Few would argue with that. But there is a grave danger that if it proceeds too fast and fails to take the concerns of the industry in account then little will be gained.

Animal welfare won't be served if the only effect of outlawing battery hen cages in Britain is to drive much of our egg production overseas and bring about an big increase in the number of continental battery farms. Yet that's what could happen unless this is done properly.

It's rather ironic that the Ministry of Agriculture played a big part in helping to design the new type of larger battery cages which were to have been introduced to replace smaller cages facing the axe. Now MAFF's successor department, Defra, appears ready to ditch those new cages as well in favour of the free range solution. Farmers are angry and they're worried. Consultation on this issue must mean what it says and changes must be delayed until full agreement is reached. Anything less puts another sector of our threatened agricultural industry in jeopardy.

As state funding of hospices comes under scrutiny, **JONATHAN FARNHILL**, Director of Resources at St Luke's Hospice in Plymouth, assesses the financial cost of a 'priceless' service



● COMFORT AND CARE: Jonathan Farnhill highlights the huge community support for hospices such as St Luke's

It's time to pay up for this invaluable service

THE current debate around state funding of hospices is timely. St Luke's is 20 years old this year and this has led to some reflection on where we have come from and where we hope to be in another 20 years. We can say with some confidence that just about everyone will know someone who has been cared for by a hospice, and that this care is highly valued by all those who experience it. It is difficult to imagine what our society would be like without hospices, so important have they become.

Hospices themselves have grown and diversified over the last 20 years. The developments in nursing and medical care have enabled hospices to not only support patients as they die, they have also been able to improve the remaining days, weeks and months of a patient's life, whether at home or within the hospice. While many patients describe the care as priceless, it does, of course, have a cost. If hospices did not exist, the patients would have to be cared for within hospitals and in people's homes through the NHS. The state would be obliged and required to pay for this. If this is true, why are hospices not given the equivalent amount to provide that care within the hospice itself?

Hospices are caught at present between two government organisations. On the one hand we have the charity commissioners who have issued guidance stating that we should not be funding work through charitable donations that is the responsibility of the state. On the other hand we have the health authorities, or now the primary care trusts, who decide the grant level and who have many competing

demands. In effect, if we do not receive from the PCT's a grant equivalent to the cost of providing a statutory level of care, we are in danger of breaking the law by using charitable funds to fill the gap. Our main PCT grant has increased this year, but only by 2.5 per cent, and the salary increase for the NHS is 3.6 per cent. If we are to ensure our nurses and medical staff are not penalised for providing hospice care by being given a lower salary, we have to find the funds from elsewhere. This is arguably illegal and surely, at the least, morally wrong.

These deliberations take place within a context where the grant does not cover the costs of the statutory care we deliver anyway. We are

guidance on what that statutory level of care should be for every area in the hospice. Once that is agreed we would then have a template for funding. That presumes, of course, that NICE's recommendations are supported by the hospice movement.

Another dimension to this debate is how many hospices rely on legacies for the remainder of the funding. St Luke's relies on legacy income even more than it relies on the NHS grant to continue to care, some £700,000 this year. By its nature, it is difficult to know whether we will receive this money. The following scenario is entirely possible: savings are low within the hospice, legacy income is slightly reduced, the NHS grant is frozen and

for the health service increases by 7.5 per cent. We never charge for the care given, so the increased fundraising burden must then fall on the local community.

The way we care for the dying says a lot about our society. We place a value on everyone, not for what they do, or what they have achieved, but because they exist. People access hospice care solely based on need. By caring for the dying we are saying they have an intrinsic worth and that we acknowledge their time is precious and they have a right to be able to make the most of it.

It is this which, I believe, inspires such generosity and for which everyone who is involved in hospices should be proud. St Luke's has over 470 volunteers who contribute to its work. It is absolutely clear that the local community believe in, and is committed to, hospice care. It is utterly wrong to abuse this commitment, to ask a local community to bear an excessive financial burden in order to make up for shortcomings in state funding. The extra £50 million for hospices and palliative care is welcome, but only when (and if) it arrives at its destination will it make a difference. A grant equivalent to the costs of the statutory care provided would help us recruit and retain our staff. Most importantly, however, it will reassure our communities that the hospice will be there when they need it.

Existing grant is £530,000 and this would need to increase to £715,000. In this example, staffing levels at the hospice are equivalent to the same staffing levels as found in an acute elderly unit in a hospital (in practice they are higher than this but this increase then takes the care beyond a statutory provision).

'We are still paying through charitable donations for care that people have been told should be paid for by state funding'

still paying through charitable donations for care that people have been told, through the Cancer Plan, should be paid for by state funding. We estimate that for us to receive a grant that covered the salary costs of just our staff on the inpatient unit (the hospice also has a day hospice, outpatient clinics and community nursing), along with the drugs and dressings needed, we would need an increase in the current grant of some 35 per cent.

In a way this is a temporary problem, if you can describe a three-year problem as temporary. NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence – the health world is bedevilled by acronyms) is to issue

there is a national above inflation salary rise for medical and nursing staff. This could lead very quickly to bed closures, which has already happened at many hospices.

Hospices have a clear vision of what they would like to receive. If the state were to pay for the statutory basic care, similar to what would be provided in a hospital, then the charitable donations can be for the "extras" (higher staffing ratios – allowing us to devote more quality time to patients, complementary therapies, freshly prepared food etc). It seems illogical for us to receive a 2.5 per cent increase in grant when salaries rise by 3.6 per cent and the annual budget spend