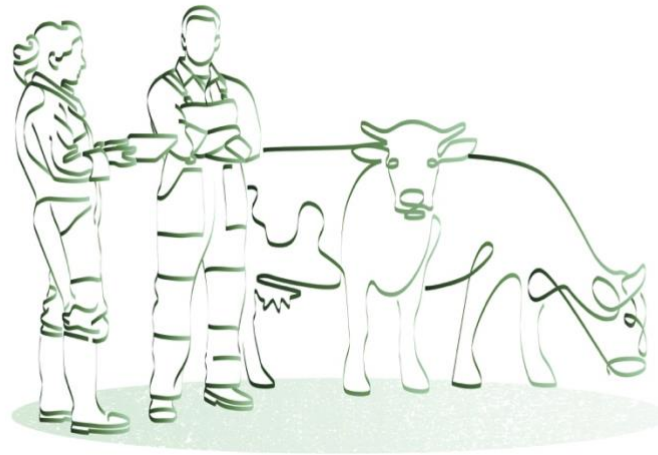


Inspector@work: Upper Austria, Austria



As my parents had a small farm, my interest in animals was awakened very early on and I wanted to become a vet. I studied veterinary medicine with the ulterior motive of wanting to actively protect animals in accordance with the law. The logical continuation of this idea is that I have now been working as an official veterinarian for 5 years. It was always important to me to be out on the farms with the farmers and not sitting at a desk in an office.

Immediately after graduating, I worked for 2 years in a mixed veterinary practice specialising in cattle – including ante-mortem and post-mortem inspections, where animal welfare also plays a major role. In addition to my work as an official veterinarian, I also run a small animal practice, which is simply a passion for me.

In my work, I am responsible for all areas of animal husbandry, but our district is certainly one of the richest in cattle in Austria. Horse husbandry also plays a role in my day-to-day work, where in addition to horse farms, I am also responsible for a small insemination centre and a small abattoir for horses.

On average, I spend one day a week dealing with reports of offences against the Animal Welfare Act, whereby the ratio between farm animals and pets is balanced. Unfortunately, there have recently been particularly serious cases of cruelty to cattle, which also required police intervention as no co-operation could be reached with the animal owners. In some of these cases, the farms had to be closed, and the animals were confiscated. Such situations are of course particularly dramatic for everyone involved, but fortunately do not occur very often.

As an authority, we have to act in accordance with the law, and the first step in the case of offences under the Animal Welfare Act is to decree improvement measures. Here it can happen that you find yourself in a dilemma. If the livestock owner manages to rectify the shortcomings found, then I have to accept this as an authority, even if I personally fear that the farm will have problems again soon. However, I also recognise that at some point there will have to be potentially harsh consequences. For example, a reduction in numbers or, even more severely, a closure of the farm, which would only take place if the extent of the cruelty to animals constitutes imminent danger or there are two offences relating to cruelty to animals within a short period of time. However, I am not in favour of penalties, as these do not solve the problem. The decisive factor is the decreed measures for improvement.

Officially, I represent the controlling authority, but in my experience, this cannot function without some form of support through counselling.

One challenge but also a great enrichment in my work is the contradiction between control and counselling. Officially, I represent the controlling authority, but in my experience, this cannot function without some form of support through

counselling. If we were to only provide livestock farmers with the decreed measures, possibly in combination with the relevant extract from the law, they would generally be overwhelmed and no solution in terms of improving animal husbandry would be achieved. As an official inspector, however, I must always remain cautious and can only outline various possible solutions, but I have to be careful not to give specific instructions. In this way, I can pass on my knowledge as a vet, but also the wealth of experience I have gained from inspecting different farms.

Naturally, as an official veterinarian, I tend to work on farms where there are no examples of best practice. However, as a practising vet, I have already experienced in the cattle sector that herd size plays an important role. Sensors and automation can be used to simplify animal control and work processes, allowing larger herds to be managed by a single person. But as soon as the relationship with the individual animal is lost – by which I mean that the behaviour of individual animals is no longer recognised – animal welfare and animal health worsen. Then it doesn't matter whether the cows are in a modern loose housing or in an old tie-stall system. So, a lot depends on the attitude and management skills of the owners.

In my opinion, the question of the skills and attitude of farmers is also central to the development of animal welfare and animal health in recent years. Farms are getting bigger, and this has also increased the professional demands on livestock farmers. It is simply difficult to manage 80–100 cows. In general, however, I am convinced that we are experiencing a positive trend in terms of animal welfare and animal health. Even if a tie-stall system with pasture access can be managed very well, the freedom of movement in a loose housing system has great advantages. Nevertheless, I believe that we still have a lot to learn in the planning of animal housing so that the systems work well. Stricter laws alone will not be enough to advance animal welfare.

Keeping up to date with the latest legal requirements is definitely a challenge in my profession. What I learnt 5 years ago when I took my Veterinary Public Health Qualification is almost no longer applicable today. Our colleagues from the head office prepare changes to the law for us official veterinarians. In addition to this, we inform ourselves on an *ad hoc* basis, but studying the legal texts is very time-consuming. It is important to know where to look if necessary.

I have learnt that there is still a lot of room for interpretation in many areas.

Austria is known for having comparatively strict animal welfare regulations. In my work, however, I have learnt that there is still a lot of room for interpretation in many areas. On the one hand, this is positive in order to allow a certain amount of room to manoeuvre, but on the other hand it creates loopholes that are sometimes exploited. One problem I see with the direct implementation of EU legislation is that standardised implementation in all Member States is difficult.

I would like to see an improvement or tightening of the law with regard to water supply. The law requires a water supply that meets physiological needs. However, this does not mean that animals must have permanent access to clean drinking water. In my opinion, this wording should be more specific. Even if it is not absolutely necessary for all animal species to have permanent access to drinking water – I realise that – but in my opinion it is a minimum requirement to give animals the opportunity to drink water at all times.