

Lame cows and fitness for transport – do farmers, livestock drivers and veterinarians agree?

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Background: In Denmark, approximately 200,000 dairy cows are culled and transported to slaughter each year. Cull cows may be more vulnerable to transport stress than younger livestock due to diseases and other weaknesses. To ensure the welfare of the cows during transport their fitness for transport must be assessed before loading. Lameness is a major welfare problem in dairy herds and a common reason for culling. Thus, assessing fitness for transport of lame dairy cows is a frequent task for farmers, livestock drivers and veterinarians.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the agreement within and between these three groups of professionals in relation to lameness scoring and assessment of fitness for transport. The study used an online questionnaire consisting of 30 short video recordings of walking cows seen from the side. The videos recordings covered the entire spectrum from not lame to severely lame and were shown in random order. Participants were asked to lameness score each cow and then assess if the cow was fit for transport or not. Weighted and unweighted kappa were used as a measure of interrater agreement within and between groups.

Results: The levels of agreement within and between the three professional groups were at best moderate. Farmers agreed less than moderate within their own group as well as compared to veterinarians and livestock drivers when assessing fitness for transport.

Conclusions: In general, it raises concern that the level of agreement on fitness for transport was moderate or even lower both within and between groups. The study focused on lameness; however, lameness is just one part of assessment of fitness for transport. In reality, assessment of fitness for transport is much more complex including both factors related to the individual cow and the transport. The results suggest a need for more focus on assessment of fitness for transport, including research and possibly training of the different professional groups in order to ensure good animal welfare during transport.