



WSAVA
Global Veterinary Community

WSAVA Animal Welfare Guidelines

for companion animal practitioners and veterinary teams

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Preamble

Veterinarians are considered by society to be experts in animal health and the treatment and prevention of animal disease and are similarly regarded in matters of animal welfare. As such, veterinarians are expected to make judgements regarding the welfare of animals both in their care and beyond (Siegford, Cottee and Widowski, 2010). The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) recommends that veterinarians *“should be the leading advocates for the welfare of all animals, recognizing the key contribution that animals make to human society through food production, companionship, biomedical research and education”* (OIE, 2012). Additionally, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE), together with the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) declare that *“Veterinarians are, and must continually strive to be, the leading advocates for the good welfare of animals in a continually evolving society”* (AVMA, 2014).

Professional and societal expectations confer a responsibility upon veterinarians to lead the way in promoting good animal welfare, and making ethical decisions for their animal patients, in often difficult situations. The specific decisions made by a veterinarian will vary depending on local legislative requirements, drug and equipment availability, and cultural expectations; a global understanding of the role of the veterinary practitioner in promoting animal welfare is fundamental for advancing companion animal* health and welfare around the world.

So, what is animal welfare? While there currently is no universally accepted definition, for the purpose of this document we will define it as follows:

**“Animal welfare is the physical and psychological, social
and environmental well-being of animals”**

Veterinary professionals are expected to provide not only for physical health, but also the non-physical aspects of animal welfare that allow for the psychological, social and environmental well-being of their patients. And veterinarians must do so in the face of a diverse socio-economic, cultural, technological, and educational world.

Companion animal practice is a rapidly growing and increasingly important segment of the global veterinary profession, with the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) itself representing more than 200,000 individual veterinarians belonging to over 100 associations (WSAVA, 2018). The benefits of leading companion animal practitioners to a better understanding of, and

* Companion animals can be defined as “domesticated or domestic-bred animals whose physical, emotional, behavioural and social needs can be readily met as companions in the home, or in close daily relationship with humans” (ASPCA, 2018). While this definition can encompass many species of animals, this document primarily refers to the welfare of dogs and cats. However, the welfare principles are universal and can be applied to other animal species not specifically mentioned here.

practice in animal welfare are many, and include increased professional satisfaction, enhanced client perceptions and improved compliance, safety and benefits to individuals and communities.

A good understanding of how to provide for the pet's welfare also provides a means of building trust with animal owners. Studies have shown that owners whose pets are considered "part of the family" are more responsive to veterinary recommendations, as are those who have an established pet-owner-veterinary bond (Lue, Pantenburg and Crawford, 2008). A recent survey revealed that clients of veterinarians who discussed with them the value of human-animal connections were up to 77% more likely to follow the veterinary recommendations, come for wellness appointments and purchase pet insurance (HABRI, 2016). Overall, this can allow for better patient care, improve professional satisfaction for the veterinarian and the veterinary team, and result in healthier animals and happier pet-owning individuals or families.

Multiple human health studies have provided scientific evidence that pets can influence human physical and emotional health, minimise depression, and improve social interactions amongst people (Takashima and Day, 2014). Evidence was so compelling in relation to cardiovascular disease (CVD) that, in 2013, the American Heart Association issued the statement that "pet ownership, particularly dog ownership, may be reasonable for reduction in CVD risk" (Levine et al., 2013). These and other studies help underline the importance of pets in people's lives and how pet-owner relationships can influence human health.

The evidence for a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and their pets continues to mount, and the need for universally accepted guidelines for companion animal welfare has been identified. As a global veterinary association, WSAVA is ideally placed to introduce these animal welfare guidelines, designed to be utilised by all companion animal veterinarians no matter in what geographical region they practice.

These guidelines are intended to assist companion animal veterinarians throughout the world in their understanding of contemporary animal welfare concepts and science, and provide guidance on addressing potential animal welfare problems, navigating some more common ethical issues, and promoting good animal welfare through effective communication, both within the veterinary clinic* and beyond.

* Throughout these guidelines the term "veterinary clinic" is used as a universal descriptor for any place (or circumstance) where veterinary services are offered, no matter how large or small, advanced or modest in scope. The term is intended to be synonymous with veterinary and/or animal - surgery, practice, facility, centre, hospital etc.

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Chapter 1: Animal welfare - recognition and assessment

Recommendations

To realise the veterinary profession's commitment to the highest animal welfare standards, WSAVA calls on member organisations and companion animal veterinarians to:

1. develop an animal welfare charter that reflects their commitment to animal welfare.
2. seek to continuously improve animal welfare understanding and so promote positive welfare states for all companion animals in all veterinary interactions.
3. promote knowledge and understanding of animal welfare and its management within the wider community of pet owners.
4. cater to both physical and behavioural needs of animals when providing for their care in veterinary clinics.

Background

The general public are increasingly concerned with how animals are treated in society and the promotion of good animal welfare (Siegford, Cottee and Widowski, 2010). But what does good animal welfare actually mean?

Animals have always been an integral part of human lives. From early prehistory, humans were closely associated with animals. This is evident from prehistoric drawings of animals, including the art of Chauvet Cave, some 36,000 years ago (Shipman, 2010). Although the role of companion animals in human lives varies around the world, they play an important role in human society in many places. Pet ownership is a global phenomenon (McConnell et al., 2011). Nearly 70% of North Americans share their lives with at least one pet (Hodgson et al., 2015), while in Australia there are more than 24 million pets, equalling or surpassing the total human population (Animal Medicines Australia, 2016). Pet ownership in Brazil is estimated at 132 million with more than 52 million dogs; China more than 22 million dogs and 53 million cats; Japan more than 9 million dogs and 7 million cats; France more than 8 million dogs and 9 million cats, with least one cat or one dog owned 29% and 20% of households respectively (McConnell et al., 2011; Statista, 2017), while in Tanzania nearly 14% of households owned at least one dog (Knobel, 2008).

People and animals have had close associations throughout time due to the human-animal bond. The human-animal bond is described as a mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals that is essential to the health and well-being of both (AVMA, 2018). Human-animal interactions include any situation where there is contact between humans and animals at an individual and cultural level (AVMA, 2018). Interactions with animals result in a number of benefits to humans. In children, there are associations between pet ownership and a lower prevalence of allergic sensitisation (Ownby, 2002), and educational and cognitive benefits (Purewal et al., 2017), while in adults, improvements in cardiovascular measures and decreases in loneliness are reported (Matchock, 2015).

Veterinary attitudes to animal welfare are important for several reasons; concern for the welfare of animals is considered to be an essential part of veterinary practice (Paul and Podberscek, 2000). As outlined above, there are a number of positive benefits to humans as a result of their relationships with animals. In the veterinary clinic, in addition to professional satisfaction, protecting the welfare of animals may provide positive economic benefits. Owners will prefer the clinical setting where their pet is well cared for and not distressed during the visit. Dogs and cats may become distressed by any procedure including manual restraint, and a lasting impact on the emotional state of the patient can predispose to a negative conditioned emotional response that may lead to increased difficulty during future patient visits (Barletta and Raffe, 2017). Gentle handling and appropriate sedation when required can help avoid stressful encounters and can improve the welfare outcome for both cats and dogs. Owners who appreciate the improved outcomes are more likely to remain loyal clients of the clinic and help, through word-of-mouth recruitment, to introduce new clients; and as a result, economic benefits to the clinic can follow.

[What do we mean by animal welfare?](#)

The welfare of animals is an emotive topic and may mean different things to different people. Additionally, the words “welfare” and “well-being” are often used interchangeably. In scientific terms, no universally accepted definition of animal welfare exists; however, those most commonly used encompass many of the same ideas and principles. There have been several definitions proposed in the scientific literature; for example, “*the state of an individual (animal) as regards its attempts to cope with its environment*” (Broom, 1986). It has also been suggested that to define animal welfare we should ask two questions: “*Are the animals healthy?*” and “*Do the animals have what they want?*” (Dawkins, 2008). Broadly speaking, animal welfare refers to the physiological and psychological well-being of animals – in other words, how is an individual animal coping, both mentally and physically, at a particularly point in time.

In these guidelines we define animal welfare as “the physical and psychological, social and environmental well-being of animals.” A consistent definition is important because our perception of what welfare entails will affect how we evaluate, view and treat the animals under our care.

There are three overlapping concepts of animal welfare as defined by Fraser (2008):

1. physical state and functioning;
2. psychological or mental (affective) state;
3. ability to perform natural behaviours and live according to its natural state.

These three aspects of animal welfare are interconnected, but peoples and societies can place different levels of importance on each. It is essential that we are aware of our own biases towards each of these areas because if we focus too much on one, we may overlook problems in another area. For example, as veterinarians we are trained to focus heavily on physical health and thus we often focus on health-related parameters of welfare. However, welfare is not synonymous only with physical health and it is essential that we also consider the psychological and behavioural aspects of health. In

particular, how the animal feels (its psychological or mental state) is vitally important for positive animal welfare.

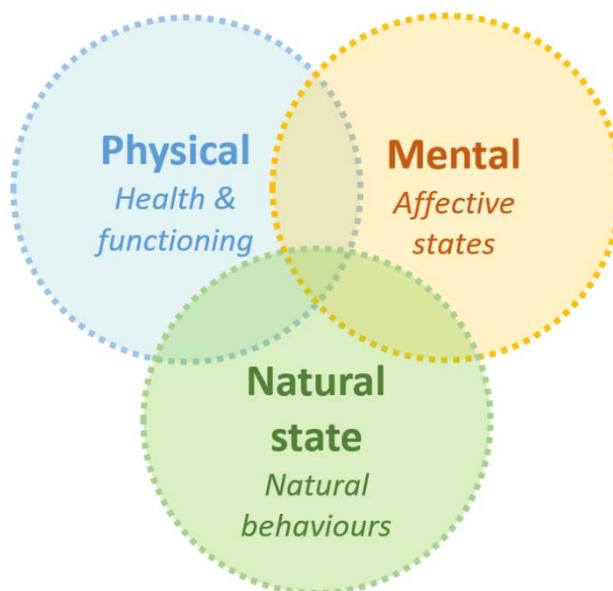


Figure 1. Three overlapping animal welfare concepts (adapted from Fraser, 2008)

Animal sentience

Sentience is an important concept in animal welfare. Professor John Webster defines animal sentience as “feelings that matter” (Webster, 2007) and suggests that sentient animals have an awareness of their environment and the ability to make choices.

The New Zealand Veterinary Association defines sentience as the ability to feel, perceive or experience subjectively. Animals are not only capable of feeling pain and distress, but also of having positive experiences such as comfort, pleasure or interest that are appropriate to the particular species, environment and circumstances (NZVA, 2018). The European Union’s Lisbon Treaty of 2009 acknowledges that animals are sentient beings (European Commission, 2009), and other countries such as New Zealand also recognise animal sentience (New Zealand Animal Welfare Act, 1999). The American Animal Hospital Association has also adopted a position supporting the concept of animals as sentient beings (AAHA, 2012).

Sentience includes an animal’s ability to experience positive and negative affective states (emotions plus other feelings such as hunger and thirst), including pain. Animals will choose to seek positive and avoid negative experiences. This occurs regardless of an animal’s intelligence; suffering and pleasure are defined as the ability to feel, and not by the ability to think. Recognition of animal sentience in law may go above simply protecting animals from pain or suffering, as the definition of sentience includes both positive and negative states, thus promoting positive welfare, not simply protecting against poor welfare.

Animal welfare science and assessment

Science can help us to determine the physical and mental factors that affect the welfare of animals and to measure an animal's welfare objectively. Welfare assessment requires an understanding of a range of scientific disciplines such as behaviour, health and immunology (Dawkins, 1998). Scientific evaluation of animal welfare issues provides an objective way to make decisions about animals and what matters to them. Taking a non-emotive, scientific approach and using evidence from rigorous studies of animals and their responses to environmental challenges, we can be more confident that we are providing a view of the situation that better reflects the situation from the animal's point of view.

However, science alone cannot help us to decide on the right and wrong way to treat animals.

- Science – can tell us what animals **need**;
- Ethics – can tell us how we **should treat** animals;
- Law – tells us how we **must treat** animals.

In measuring animal welfare, we use science-based indicators, whilst deciding on how an animal should be treated we use value-based judgements. People's judgements on the way animals should be treated vary, with differences depending on culture, religion and other factors. In some parts of the world it is societally acceptable for dogs to roam and enjoy a high level of behavioural freedom; however, these dogs may experience a variety of health problems such as infectious diseases (good welfare according to natural living but poor welfare according to physical state). In other parts of the world, free-roaming dogs are not societally acceptable (value-based judgements) and so these dogs would be in some way restricted (e.g. housed or put into a shelter) where they may have a good physical state (e.g. infectious disease control through veterinary care and vaccination), but they may experience poor behavioural and psychological welfare from the environmental restriction. In both cases a value-based judgement has been made about what is a societally acceptable way to manage dogs, but in each case that judgement has not necessarily resulted in a good welfare state.

Animals under human care experience many factors that might affect their welfare. These include the social and physical environment, dietary factors, interactions with humans and members of their own or other species as well as their ability to exhibit behaviours normal or typical for their species. Because of differences between species and their behaviour, there are specific welfare concerns for different animals. For example, a welfare concern for some pet dogs is being left home alone. When adequately socialised, dogs are typically social animals, and being left alone can result in negative psychological welfare, causing frustration and anxiety in some individuals. Conversely cats may struggle with social living as they are selectively-social and may have difficulty in coping when there is competition for resources or social conflict with other cats. Often welfare problems arise when there is a conflict between animal needs and human desires.

The welfare spectrum and how animals cope

Recognising that animals may experience both positive and negative emotional states, good and poor health, and behavioural diversity or restriction, we can see that these elements all influence the welfare of the animals along a continuum from negative or poor welfare to positive or good welfare (Figure 2, adapted from Ohl and van der Staay, 2012).



Figure 2. The welfare spectrum - the general concept of animal welfare shown as a continuum between negative/poor welfare and positive/good welfare.

While the intent may be always to achieve high levels of good animal welfare, animals have evolved to interact with and adapt to varied environments. Thus, short periods of “negative welfare” may be inevitable and necessary as triggers for an animal to respond with the appropriate physiological and behavioural repertoire to allow adaptation to any changes (Ohl and Putman, 2014). An animal’s welfare is not generally at risk unless its ability to respond is not adequate to meet an environmental challenge (Korte et al., 2009), or unless it is housed in a situation to which it cannot adapt or cope. When an animal can cope with these changes, adaptation or habituation occurs. However, when an animal cannot cope, suffering, learned helplessness and unpleasant feelings such as frustration or anxiety may occur (Figure 3).

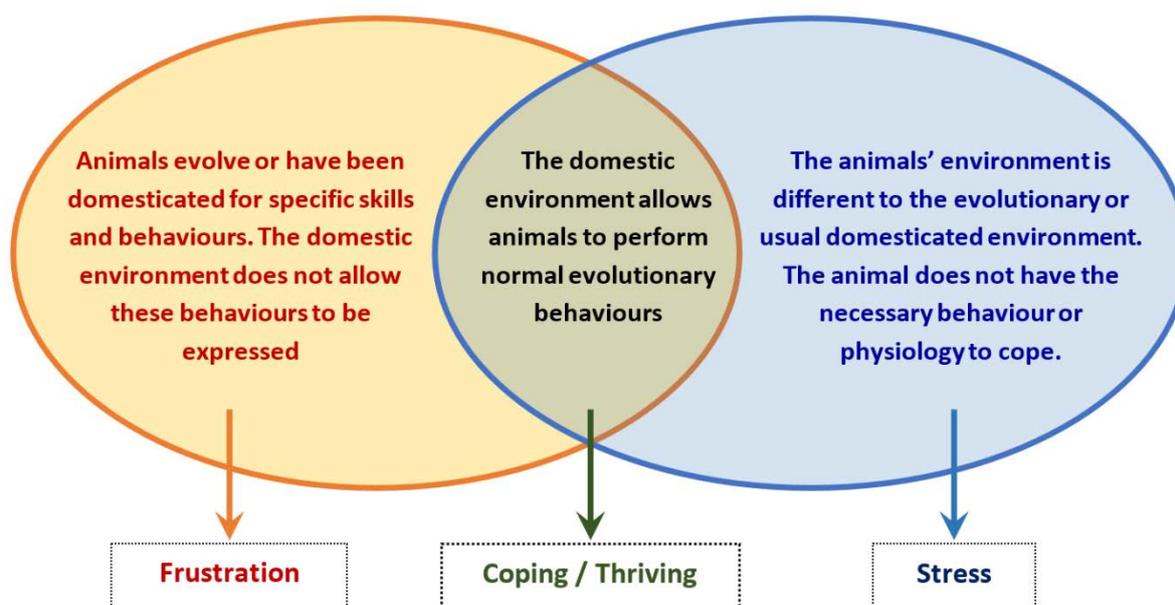


Figure 3. Schematic showing the differences in outcome for animals when they are able to perform normal evolutionary behaviours and skills or if their environment does not allow these to occur.

[Animal welfare science and animal ethics](#)

Animal welfare is about the experiences of an animal and how it is feeling and coping, including its physical and psychological state. Animal welfare science uses scientific methods to help us to determine the impact of human actions on the welfare of the animals. For example, we may analyse the behaviours displayed by an animal, and measure stress hormones in the blood to evaluate an animal's welfare state. We would then apply our ethical judgement to determine whether that animal's welfare state is acceptable or whether we have an ethical responsibility to take steps to mitigate any welfare problems (Meijboom, 2017).

Animal ethics is a philosophical study of why animals matter morally and how we should treat and care for animals i.e. what is right or wrong in our treatment of animals. Animal welfare requires both scientific assessments and discussions on animal ethics based on philosophical analysis. In Chapter 4 we discuss some of the important animal ethical theories are used to determine how an animal should be treated.

[What are our responsibilities to improve animal welfare? Applying animal welfare frameworks](#)

In 1965, growing public concern in the UK over the treatment of animals in intensive livestock farming led to the development of an independent inquiry into farm animal welfare, and the subsequent publication of the Brambell Report (Brambell, 1965). This in turn led to the establishment of the U.K. Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC). FAWC was an independent advisory body and developed the **Five Freedoms** as a framework to meet the welfare needs of farmed species (National Archives, 2012). In 2006, the Five Freedoms were adapted into the **Five Animal Welfare Needs**, applicable to all domestic animals.

The Five Animal Welfare Needs provide a useful framework for ensuring that human caregivers are providing for the basic welfare requirements of animals:

- The need for a suitable environment
- The need for a suitable diet
- The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

These needs take into account the physical and psychological welfare of the animal and require that animal caregivers are familiar with the needs of the species in their care. The list of needs is not definitive; however, they provide a useful framework, and categorisation, of possible welfare concerns. For example, a housing system may provide an animal with all it needs for good physical health, such as food, water, warmth and shelter, therefore in terms of its health, the animal may be experiencing a high level of welfare. However, the same housing system may be very restrictive in terms of the ability to exhibit normal behaviour, and in that respect, the animal may be experiencing poor welfare. Possibly what is most relevant to animal welfare is how an animal actually "feels".

The welfare of companion animals in a veterinary clinic is monitored through clinical assessment and behavioural observations. To be able to maintain and improve animal welfare in companion animal veterinary clinics, we should encourage explicit and straightforward recording of animal welfare, including physical and psychological welfare. Use of the Five Animal Welfare Needs outlined above affords a practical approach of allowing for both physical and psychological well-being. In Chapter 2, further detail will be provided on how animal welfare can be measured in veterinary practice.

Animal welfare and society

When considering potential obstacles that obstruct interventions to protect animal welfare, it is timely to consider how animals, humans, society and environment closely interact. It is implausible to think about animals without considering their wider ecological context. Stanley, Richardson and Prior (2005) developed an ecological model for the development of children, and this committee has adapted this ecological model for companion animals (Figure 4).

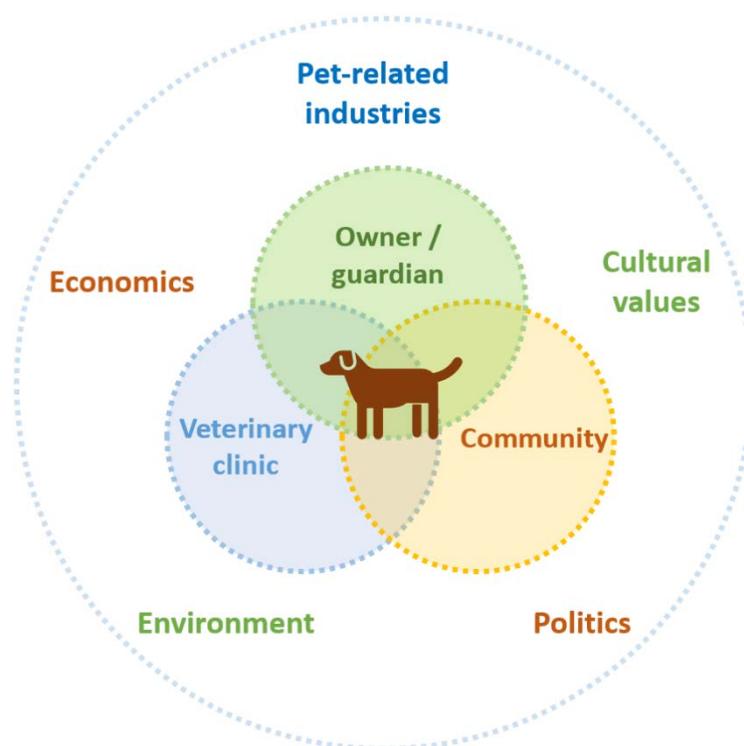


Figure 4. An ecological model of the interactions between companion animals, the veterinary clinic, the owner/guardian and the wider community. Modified, based on Stanley, Richardson and Prior (2005)

The companion animal sits in the centre of this model and is directly influenced by its owner(s), the wider community, and the veterinary care that it receives. Outside this inner circle of influence, the animal may be affected by the environment (e.g. dog off-lead exercise areas), economics (e.g. personal financial constraints may affect the affordability of veterinary care), cultural values (e.g. in some cultures dogs are regarded as work or food animals rather than companions, while the impact of cats on local wildlife adversely affects public tolerances), and local and international politics. These WSAVA

Guidelines focus on the interactions that occur in the veterinary clinic, but this model is a reminder that we need to always keep in mind the bigger picture of how animals interact with people and the wider community and society. Furthermore, as discussed above the human-animal bond is an integral part of this entire system and should not be underestimated.

In a model society, all would continually and automatically think about our actions and decisions in terms of their importance for, and impact on, companion animals, their owners and the broader community. All veterinary guidelines and protocols would be assessed to ensure they delivered the best welfare outcome for all pets under the clinic's care. Veterinary clinics and teams would safeguard the welfare not only of their own patients and their owners, but also reach out to the wider community through advocacy and provide professional expertise in all matters relating to companion animals. This would include all aspects of animal welfare, from managing urban populations of dogs and cats, to support for unwanted pets and planning to provide physical and mental exercise for dogs (and their owners) in all environments.

Conclusion

The field of animal welfare is complex and involves the application of a range of scientific indicators to determine how an animal is coping and how it feels. Animal ethics is a philosophical approach to determining how we should treat animals by applying value-based judgements. Companion animals play important roles for people around the world, including as companions and assistance animals, and the role of the veterinarian in improving their welfare is an important one for the profession and to society as a whole.

Checklist

- ✓ Are you up to date with scientific advances in understanding and assessing animal welfare?
 - ✓ Do you have a stated policy commitment to manage and promote animal welfare in your clinic?
 - ✓ Do you have a written animal welfare charter outlining the principles of your clinic's or association's commitment to protecting animal welfare? (e.g. RSPCA, 2018; Charter for Animal Compassion, 2018)
 - ✓ Do all your staff members understand the clinic's commitment to manage and promote animal welfare?
 - ✓ Have you communicated your commitment to animal welfare to your clients, community and others?
 - ✓ Is your veterinary association's or licensing body's veterinary oath or affirmation available for all to view in the clinic? (see WSAVA Veterinary Oath, 2014)
 - ✓ Does your approach to animal welfare seek to minimise any negative welfare states?
 - ✓ Does your approach to animal welfare always strive to promote positive welfare states?
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