

Let's be kind to animals, especially to those we eat!

By T.I. Hughes

Canadians collectively eat or export, approximately 400 million animals, birds and fish every year! These creatures are living, sentient beings. They suffer, to differing degrees, pain and stress. They die in different ways, some painless, some painful. But probably the majority suffers some degree of stress before finally dying. And every Canadian, whether vegetarian or not, is equally responsible for this gross, large scale, suffering.

The majority of these animals die in slaughter houses which are licensed, inspected and regulated by the Government of Canada through the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, a federal government department. The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food will reassure you that these slaughter houses are inspected by veterinarians who enforce the regulations which require that these animals are "rendered unconscious by an approved humane method" before they can be processed any further. All food animals are 'bled' (exsanguinated) by cutting the carotid artery in the throat. To encourage quick and complete bleeding most animals and birds are hoisted or hung upside down before being bled.

That is the law, and that is certainly the intent of government politicians, veterinarians, and slaughter-house workers. And certainly it is the pious belief of millions of Canadians who eat meat and meat by-products.

But what is the actual practice? First the methods used to stun animals and birds must be practical. The system must allow a predetermined number of animals to be processed through the plant at a given rate. Obviously a plant killing say, 500 hogs per day, has less of a challenge than one killing 1,000 hogs per day. So the rate of "throughput" is vital. The level of staffing is dictated by the demands of the system but must be economical. If the economics don't permit sufficient staff to ensure efficient, well trained, personnel at all stages of the system, then, obviously, there will be gaps in the system where there is little or no supervision.

Most Canadians believe, because they want to believe, that kind, concerned, animal-loving veterinarians supervise animal slaughter in order to guarantee that the animals do not suffer. Well, the reality is that the 'kind veterinarian' is in the plant, at least bigger plants, but he, or she, may not be in the position to observe the actual killing. The modern system places more importance on food safety and as a result the actual slaughter is neglected.

Another problem is that methods are used to stun animals that may be humane in theory but not in practice. One good example is 'manual dislocation' or, in other words, breaking the neck of the animal. Imagine doing that repeatedly, hour after hour. Cruel to the animal; demeaning and, eventually, demoralizing to the operator.

Electric shock is used to stun millions of birds. The most common method is the so-called 'electric knife'. The blade is live. It is simply touched to the head of the bird. The bird becomes still and the operator cuts its throat. But expert scientific studies show that the bird is not unconscious, but in fact paralyzed.

'Blunt trauma' is the euphemism for beating or clubbing an animal into unconsciousness. Whilst the method is grossly unpleasant to watch it is even more unpleasant for the operator. And, obviously, very painful for the animal. And as the day

wears on, the operator becomes tired and, as a result, less efficient.

Millions of animals and birds die, unnecessarily, a less than humane death. They need not suffer in this way. A pain-free, minimum-stress system is possible. But nothing will change unless and until the Canadian public demands change.

What is needed is the appointment by the federal government of an independent committee of experts, all completely at arm's length from industry, and without any involvement in a political party and with scientific credentials that are beyond challenge.

Such a committee would have to be given the authority to investigate any and all aspects of the slaughter industry and to recommend changes and improvements in the way hundreds of millions of animals and birds die to feed Canadians and to ensure that their recommendations are fully implemented.

And then we could claim to be kind to the animals we eat. They deserve our kindness and compassion.