

Double Standards for Castrating Farm Animals

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Students trying to gain admission into a veterinary college are part of a very competitive process. There are many more applicants than there are available positions. As a result, all of the successful applicants invariably have a history of academic excellence during their undergraduate studies. For the most part, the successful candidates could be described as bright, inquisitive and perceptive individuals. They are all smart, but they do come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Some of them come from rural areas and have been raised around livestock, while others come from urban centers and grew to love animals through their experiences with pets. However, all of them share a common goal of wanting to become veterinarians and all of them are eager to learn the skills of their chosen profession.

Now imagine the questions that can arise from such an intelligent and diverse group when they are confronted with the fact that our pet animals are castrated using anesthetics and farm animals are not! As instructors, how are we to explain this disparity? Do farm animals feel less pain during castration? Are pets so anatomically different from farm animals such that we need to follow completely different procedures? Do only pets deserve humane treatment? Do economics drive all decisions on how to treat farm animals? Are there alternatives to castration? Is there not a reasonable way to mitigate pain during castration of farm animals?

Remember that such questions are being launched, not by individuals who are bent on destroying the livestock industry, but by bright students trying to understand the history, logic and science that has shaped the practices and procedures followed by veterinarians and producers. As instructors trying to answer these questions we find our previously held opinions, shaped by our own rural upbringing and experiences, falling short in upholding practices that are based on convenience, tradition and economics instead of science.

If our veterinary students and their instructors have doubts about the legitimacy of castrating farm animals without anesthetics, then we should not be surprised to learn about stronger concerns and criticisms raised by individuals who are further removed from the industry.

It is obvious that society is growing intolerant of this double standard. A recent court case in Ontario brings home this point. There a woman defendant was found guilty of willfully causing unnecessary pain and suffering to an animal after she castrated a dog with an elastrator ring (The Kingston Whig-Standard, November 8, 2002). What makes this case most interesting is that elastrator rings, which restrict blood flow and cause testes to die and eventually drop off, are an accepted and very common method of castrating some of our farmed animal species (cattle and sheep in particular). The defendant's lawyer argued that his client could not be guilty if the equipment and procedure is standard within the livestock industries. The judge presiding, Mr. Justice Paul Megginson, called the practice "abominable", stating, "This case is not about whether the procedure is OK, it clearly isn't and should be banned." The judge's remarks in this case are quite likely the tip of the iceberg in terms of unspoken public sentiment regarding animal welfare. Society assumes that virtually no one should intentionally inflict pain on any animals under human care, especially where it can be avoided. However, the practices of dehorning and castration are two examples where producers could be viewed as intentionally and unnecessarily inflicting pain on animals when they do the procedure without trying to mitigate the pain.

It is a matter of scientific fact that many routine livestock procedures (e.g., branding,

castration, dehorning, tail-docking, etc.) cause physical pain. Although it may not have been the case years ago, today many of these sources of pain are avoidable (for example the use of polled bulls) or in some cases the pain could be controlled. Some countries slaughter livestock before they reach sexual maturity and thereby eliminate the need for castration. In the United Kingdom procedures like castration can be done by the producer until the animal reaches a specific age at which point castration must be completed by a veterinarian using anesthetics. In Australia there is a growing trend towards immunologically castrating pigs with an injectable vaccine called Improvac, thereby avoiding the need to castrate altogether. Such examples demonstrate that it is possible to circumvent painful procedures if there is serious intent to do so.

In recent decades the veterinary profession has refined agents to alleviate the pain that animals experience both during and after surgical procedures. No truly insurmountable obstacles exist, aside from lack of will, to prevent the use of such agents to alleviate pain, where necessary, for farm animals. At the very least routine procedures should be done within the first week of life when the healing process is quickest.

Livestock industries face many contentious issues, such as biosecurity, food safety, environmental stewardship and animal welfare. While certain welfare matters may be more arguable than others, practices that we know cause pain are largely indefensible. Court cases such as the one described above are likely to be more prevalent in future. We may argue the alternatives are too expensive, too time consuming and too impractical, but a judge may not see it that way.

Livestock commodity groups need to carefully examine how these issues apply to their production systems and be proactive. Only high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution can solve these contentious issues. They will not go away on their own, or be solved by accident!