

The Veterinarian's Role in Controlling Pain in Farm Animals

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Many challenges facing the livestock industries, such as food safety, biosecurity, emerging diseases, animal welfare and animal health automatically fall within the scope of a veterinarian's duty by the simple nature of a veterinarian's training and licensing. However, I believe that working to maintain and improve animal welfare is everyone's duty. This includes me, producers, scientists, industry and society as a whole. However, by default, animal welfare is strongly bound to the veterinarian's role, since an animal's health has an inherent link to its well being or its welfare. In addition, there is a strong public sentiment that it is the duty of the veterinarian to be an unbiased advocate for animals. While everyone understands that the veterinarian is technically on the payroll of the producer, the public also expects the veterinarian to look past the producer's interest, and take into account the interest of the animals as well as the concerns of the public. From the veterinarian's perspective he/she has three interested parties to serve. Generally this triad of interests between the producer, the animal and the public is easily negotiated by the veterinarian when it comes to issues such as diseases, health or food safety where everyone benefits through improvements. But what about situations where economics and profitability dictate choices for a producer that have a negative impact on an animals well being? When there is conflict between the three parties, whose interest should the veterinarian serve? I believe our attempts or failures to minimize pain and suffering of farm animals is one of these potentially controversial gray areas which can leave veterinarians uncertain as to their responsibilities and allegiance.

Part of the complexity is that many producers may object or dismiss attempts to mitigate pain in farm animals, even though the public expects it and the animals would certainly benefit from it. A simple solution for a veterinarian would be to accede to the wishes of the party paying for the service or, in other words: do as the producers asks. I believe for the veterinary profession to simply follow the lead of the food animal industry (or a client) regarding pain management is a risky public relations venture and it devalues and underestimates the role of the veterinarian as a leader and educator for the industry when it comes to health-related topics. In addition, failure to address the issue of pain in farm animals violates the accepted principles of good animal welfare as laid down by the Farm Animal Welfare Council, as shown below in Table 1. So not only is the veterinarian the best trained to treat pain, injury and disease, but he/she also plays a critical role in what society has come to recognize as basic animal welfare.

Table 1. The Five Freedoms of Farm Animals as revised by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (1993)

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour
5. Freedom from fear and distress

I believe veterinarians do an excellent job of treating injuries and disease; both important categories that we accept as part of animal welfare. But could it be that the veterinary profession,

in some instances has shirked some of the responsibility in dealing with pain by allowing the client or the livestock industries to call all the “shots” regarding pain management? Some may argue that the client pays the bills; therefore the client should have the most say in the situation. However, an invitation by a client to a veterinarian to assist with painful procedures should also be viewed as an invitation to offer advice and services on how to mitigate the pain. Who on the farm would be better trained than a veterinarian to appreciate what the animal is experiencing regarding pain, and who possesses the knowledge of how to mitigate it? Veterinarians come to the farm equipped with a “bag of knowledge” on how to prevent and treat injuries, diseases AND pain. If the livestock industries and producers are reluctant to treat pain, could it be that some of the reluctance is based on the hesitation by veterinarians to offer advice, training and education to the client on this topic?

Pain: What does it mean to us?

Pain is commonly defined as a basic bodily sensation induced by a noxious stimulus (either disease or injury), detected via the nervous system, typically leading to evasive action. What we know about pain can in many ways be best understood through our own experiences and suffering. Pain of course is not restricted to humans and most people intuitively know that sentient animals with a central nervous system are also capable of experiencing pain. The importance society places on eliminating and treating our own pain is carried over in our concern for animals, certainly our companion animals. In some respects, the present society has developed intolerance for pain and suffering. It is estimated that in 1995, the health care cost of treating chronic pain exceeded the cost of cancer, AIDS and heart disease combined, and this does not include the additional cost of treating acute and neuropathic pain. Drug companies invest millions of dollars each year searching for new pharmaceuticals for pain management due to the huge market potential. We have come to expect (and demand) treatment for our own pain and it is not surprising that society expects veterinarians to help alleviate any pain and suffering experienced by their companion animals. To intentionally inflict pain onto animals without attempting to alleviate it is viewed with contempt. A recent court case in Ontario exemplifies this sentiment. In this particular case the defendant was found guilty of willfully causing unnecessary pain and suffering to an animal after she castrated a dog with an elastrator ring. The defendant’s lawyer argued his client should not be guilty since the equipment and procedure is standard within the livestock industries. The judge presiding, 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 case raises important questions about the acceptability in the minds of the public on certain animal husbandry practices. The judge’s comments clearly points out the potentially dangerous disparity that exists between what is considered acceptable treatment for companion animals versus food animals.

Historical perspective

It is a matter of scientific fact that certain 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 or, in some cases, controlled. In recent decades compounds have been designed to alleviate the pain that animals experience both during and after surgical procedures. Today, I believe no truly insurmountable obstacles

exist, aside from lack of will, to use these agents to alleviate pain in farm animals.

Arguing that certain procedures (i.e., castration and dehorning) performed without using anesthetics should continue due to custom and historical precedence sounds very weak to me, considering our current understanding of pain and our ability to prevent it. It is a weak argument because the history has changed! The historical reasons for not using drugs included the fact that (1) the drugs did not exist, or 2) were not available, or 3) were too expensive. I believe it is difficult to defend our tradition to not use anaesthetics on farm animals based on the historical lack of choices our grandfathers had at their disposal. And of course, the availability of the polled gene in our beef breeds makes mechanical or chemical dehorning obsolete. However, the dairy industry still lags behind in the number of acceptable polled bulls available for use and the need to dehorn dairy calves will remain with us for some time into the future.

Economic considerations

An additional reason for failing to mitigate pain during routine procedure has to do with the costs of the drugs and involving veterinarians to do simple procedures. Does this mean that veterinarians should disappear from this debate and let producers decide how best to mitigate the pain of routine procedures? If veterinarians back away from this issue does this mean that the drugs drop out of the equation as well? The alternative, I believe, is for veterinarians to offer producers the training and the drugs to carry out the procedures without the veterinarian present, if the producer so chooses. In general, I can appreciate that veterinarians are reluctant to leave compounds such as lidocaine in producer's hands fearing its use for more radical procedures. This stalemate effectively guarantees that many routine painful procedures will be done by producers without veterinarians and without pain control. Any advancement on this issue will require the sincere effort and intention by both the veterinarian and the producer to reach a welfare-friendly solution. It also relies on veterinarians and producers working close enough together to develop a trusting patient client relationship. The situation is not hopeless. Keep in mind that solutions are possible and one industry which has set a precedent in dealing with a known painful procedure is the elk industry.

From the start, the elk industry acknowledged that there was pain associated with antler removal during the velvet stage. At the onset, producers were committed to mitigating this pain for the welfare and safety of the animals. There was certainly debate about what method should be used to mitigate pain, but there was not question in their minds that it needed to be done. Their attitude in this area should be commended! In Alberta, the elk industry together with veterinarians, developed a training and certification program for producers, to ensure their competence at effectively blocking pain prior to antler removal. With this arrangement it is no longer necessary for producers to have veterinarians perform the procedure and it gives producers access to relatively cheap products to relieve pain. I believe a similar approach could be followed for such procedures, say, as the dehorning of dairy calves. I could envision a program where veterinarians offer training courses to their dairy clients. Two likely outcomes would follow: 1) some producers would then begin to perform the blocks on the calves by themselves, or 2) many producers would witness the advantage of offering the block and may appreciate the skill of the veterinarian and subsequently include the vet in this particular chore. Either way the calves, veterinarians, the public and the producers benefit. Such a producer-training program would also go a long way in dispelling the myth that drugs such as lidocaine are expensive, when in fact the drug dosage and cost per calf is incredibly cheap. I am not advocating that vets provide lidocaine

indiscriminately to “clients”. I am suggesting instead that only clients who have been trained and are trusted by the vet should be awarded such privileges. I do not believe this approach will erode the role of the large animal veterinarian on the farm. Many producers are already performing routine procedures without veterinarians or the drugs. I am suggesting that this approach places the veterinarian in another role of serving the livestock industry.

I realize that some of these ideas and comments will fall on deaf ears. Some may point out that, “The current viability of the cattle industry due to BSE should override any discussions or concerns right now about animal welfare. Too many producers are going out of business and some vet practices may follow.” I agree the current crisis for the cattle industries and for the large animal practitioners is depressing. And I can appreciate that some issues (like BSE) can come along and trump other issues (like animal welfare) regarding the amount of energy and time that can be spent on solving “minor” issues. However, from my view of the livestock industries and society’s interest in how animals are treated in animal agriculture, I do not see animal welfare as ever falling completely off the table.

If one looks to the U.S. at the incredible reduction in the number of poultry and swine producers over the last twenty years (500,000 fewer swine producers: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/pubs/swineproceedings2002.pdf>), it is obvious that our industries continuously face incredible economic constraints and shrinking profit margins. But during this shrinkage in swine and poultry producer numbers, animal welfare issues for these industries have not gone away. In fact, as the operations have grown in size and intensification, so have society’s concerns about welfare issues grown within these industries. So even though producer numbers may shrink, animal welfare issues still need to be addressed to satisfy public concern. Just like food safety, food quality, environmental concerns, biosecurity issues and even BSE, animal welfare issues will not go away or be solved by accident. All of these issues will only be solved by high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution.

As an outsider looking in, I believe it is the veterinarian who can make a very huge contribution towards these efforts and solutions. I am optimistic and believe the veterinary profession, as a whole is capable of meeting the challenge.