

## The “accepted” practice of causing pain to farm animals

by T.I. Hughes

Millions of farm animals are subjected to different degrees of pain and suffering on a routine, almost daily basis by practices which are considered ‘*acceptable*’ – but accepted by whom? These practices are those which have been developed over the years to assist farmers to breed, rear, house and transport farm animals. Many of these practices are surgical and all of them are generally performed without the use of anaesthetics or analgesics. They include beak trimming on poultry, castration, de-horning, tail docking and branding. All these procedures, if they were used on dogs or cats without the benefit of anaesthetic or analgesic, or by an unqualified person, would lead to charges under the Criminal Code of Canada. Obviously, therefore, we have a double standard for farm animals and companion animals. They are all sentient animals who feel pain as do their human counterparts.

Some countries are now beginning to challenge the ‘accepted’ practice of painful surgical alterations to animals without the benefit of anaesthetic. In Norway, animals can only be castrated by qualified veterinarians using the appropriate anaesthetic or analgesic. Norway proposes to ban pig castration beginning in 2009. Germany has revised its animal welfare act requiring that “*painful operations may not be carried out on vertebrates without anaesthetics*”. Here in Canada, attitudes are beginning to change – but very slowly. For example, causing pain to farm animals by what is known as “*generally accepted management practices*,” is not only condoned but is excluded from the Canadian animal welfare legislation. The reason is to protect the producers against any action on the part of either the authorities or the public.

Part of the problem, and perhaps the reason why this “practice” has been “*accepted*” for so long, is that the alternative incurs additional cost for the farmer. Another problem is that pain in animals can’t always be recognized or assessed. There is a very natural anthropomorphic tendency to look for the same symptoms in animals that we, as humans, exhibit when subjected to painful procedures. This may not be a valid assessment. One solution, which won’t be easy to develop and may be even harder to apply, is to make pain killers available to farmers at a reasonable cost and permit them to administer these medications to the animals without the necessity for a veterinarian to be present. And, of course, if veterinarians are involved in the process, they will, of course, use the necessary medications to control or limit the pain involved. The problem is that the vast majority of animals are not seen by a veterinarian. The practices are painful and they cause unnecessary suffering and are practiced on a very large scale throughout Canada.

Recently, there have been four attempts to introduce legislation to Canada that would improve the protection for animals by the Criminal Code of Canada. All these attempts have been thwarted by the Senate. Part of their opposition stems from the objection of a representative of Native People who want to make quite sure that nothing is done to limit the “*traditional*” activities which the Native People claim should be maintained.

Leaving aside all together that almost all races and cultures have had traditional practices, most of which have been gracefully allowed to recede into the dark past, I don’t think any activity which is traditional to the Arctic peoples should be allowed to continue if it causes unnecessary suffering to animals. I would class this as similar to one of the many practices of Europeans which have now been relegated to oblivion. Hunting natives to win a bounty actually existed not that long ago. And, of course, there are many, many more equally gross examples.

But they are of the past.

Another objection to the change in the Criminal Code has been the fear that extreme elements would use a new Code to harass farmers by charging them with causing pain or suffering to animals in the process of castrating, de-horning etc. To avoid this danger, the government has accepted that the pain and distress caused by these practices are considered “*generally accepted management practices*,” and should be specifically exempt under the Code or similar provincial animal welfare legislation. So it seems we are caught in a circle. As long as the practices continue they will be “*generally accepted*,” and as long as they are “*generally accepted*”, they will continue to remain agricultural practices. But the general public of Canada also has a role to play in this problem. If they reject the causing of pain and suffering to millions of farm animals because of old fashioned practices then, eventually, Government will have to recognize this and change the law. And, sooner or later, the will of the general public will be such that the legislation to outlaw this cruelty will not be impeded any further by old fashioned attitudes in the Senate.

A leading Canadian scientist, Dr. John Church, Animal Welfare Specialist for Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development was quoted as saying, “to deliberately cause pain to animals without pain control is now considered unethical.” Perhaps Dr. Church should be appointed to the Senate.

If you feel that the surgical practices mentioned in this article should be banned unless the pain is controlled or prevented by the appropriate analgesics and anesthetics, then you should communicate your views to your Member of Parliament. And if you would like to know more details of the philosophy of Dr. Church then you can access the website of the Alberta Farm Animal Care ([www.afac.ca](http://www.afac.ca)). There you will find a paper by Dr. Church “*Understanding Pain and its Relevance to Animals*.”

And, on second thought, let’s not appoint Dr. Church to the Senate. Let’s leave him where he is doing some good.