

Taking Animal Pain Seriously

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National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) has started to draft a code of welfare on painful husbandry procedures. As with all other codes prepared to date, there are several issues related to this code that are complex, multi-faceted and potentially controversial, demanding ingenuity and a commitment to problem solving if they are to be managed appropriately. Not the least of these is the evolution of ideas about animal pain and the impact of that on attitudes to painful husbandry procedures, which have been used on farms for many decades. In this context I offer the following personal reflections on some ways our thinking about animal pain has changed over the years.

We have all experienced pain. Pain is an unpleasant sensation that tells us when tissue damage due to injury or a disease process is occurring or has occurred. Pain is the main symptom of injury or illness that drives us to seek help, usually by self-medication or by professional medical intervention. It is noxious. We prefer to be pain-free, and if that is not possible, we prefer our pain to be kept within tolerable limits.

A person in pain has no doubt about the reality of pain or the noxiousness of the experience. Yet, paradoxically, in the recent past, even in the late 1980s, it was quite common to doubt those who claimed they were in pain: *to be in pain is to have certainty, to hear another claim to be in pain is to have doubt.* Moreover, empathy for another's pain is less among those who have not had similar experiences: *some surgeons in the past were surprised that they required much more pain-relieving medication after surgery than any of their patients ever did!*

Doubts about the existence or intensity of pain arise at least partly because of communication problems we experience when trying to describe our pain. Given that such difficulties exist between people who share a language, it is easily seen that greater communication difficulties may exist between people and animals where there is no shared language.

Until at least the 1950s many people thought that higher animals did not feel pain, or that, if they did, it was not as significant for them as pain is for people. Indeed, as recently as the mid-1980s a Dean of a UK veterinary school considered that, in the absence of any direct way of scientifically measuring the *subjective experience* of pain (which is still not possible today), one could not prove that animal pain exists, so that, he claimed, it did not exist. By that time, however, this view was regarded as anachronistic and had been largely superseded.

Thus, the notion had developed that although the existence of animal pain cannot be proved without question, animals should be given the "benefit of the doubt". Thus, when animals behaved physically and physiologically as if they experienced pain in situations where a person would be in pain, it should be provisionally accepted that they too were experiencing pain. This grudging acceptance of animal pain meant that the onus was still on the animal to prove that it was in pain before such pain would be taken seriously. This position accorded with the then contemporary medical hesitation about provide pain-relieving drugs to people when they claimed to be in pain, for example, after surgery or due to cancer.

This "benefit of the doubt" idea about animal pain lingers in some quarters even today. It represents an intermediate step in the evolution of ideas from the previously dominant notion that "animals do not feel pain", to the view which is now held, that "higher animals – at least most of them - do feel pain". By today's standards, the "benefit of the doubt" idea seems to be incredibly parsimonious, just as the notion that "animals do not feel pain" now seems to be completely absurd. No well-informed person today could seriously doubt that higher animals can feel pain. Indeed, the onus is now on the critics of this position to prove that an animal is not in pain, rather than the reverse.

When considering farm animals, it is important to note that farmers do not like using painful procedures. They do so only because those procedures are considered to improve human safety, animal health and welfare, product quality and/or management efficiency. Many were devised with speed of execution in

mind to minimize stressful management of the livestock and pain associated with the tissue-damaging act of, for instance, removing testicles, tail or horns. Although such minimizing of stress and pain was a laudable objective, it is now well established that pain occurs both at the time such body parts are being removed or modified *and* afterwards. This raises the question of the use of pain relieving strategies in circumstances where that has not been usual to date, and especially with regard to painful procedures in livestock.

No longer is it possible to avoid facing this issue by recourse to the comforting fictions that animals do not feel pain or that if they do, the impact of their pain on them is not as great as is the impact of our pain on us. In fact we need to assume, ethically, that pain for an animal is as significant for it in its terms as our pain is for us in our terms.

This means that the issues of tradition, practicality, cost, training, and the availability of pain-relieving drugs together with veterinary supervision of their use, which are advanced by some people as impediments to the widespread use of pain relief on farms, now need to be addressed directly and with a commitment to seeking workable solutions. In particular, regulatory flexibility in the responsible and controlled use of pain relieving drugs by trained people in addition to veterinarians could be especially helpful.

The development of safer and more effective pain-relieving strategies, built on improved scientific understanding of the body's pain mechanisms, supports the current increasing acceptance that application of pain relief to animals is both possible and, when the pain is significant enough, necessary. At present this principle is applied more to companion animals than it is to livestock. This is partly because of the expectations of urban pet owners, partly because of the professional perspectives of companion animal veterinarians, and partly because of the cost of pain-relieving drugs, the regulatory controls on dispensing such drugs, and the knowledge and skill required to safely use them in livestock.

The disjunction between such companion and farm animal practices is now receiving increasing attention, and attitudes are shifting here too. Thus, some operators are offering bovine disbudding services that include local anesthetic and/or sedation. To facilitate this process, extensive scientific information is now available on drug and other pain-relieving strategies, which may be used during castration, tail docking and disbudding or dehorning of farm livestock. In addition, the signs of pain in farm livestock have been described more extensively. These are often quite subtle because, as prey species, ruminants in particular may have evolved to hide their pain to avoid attracting the attention of predators.

There are other ways by which such pain in livestock can be reduced. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is to avoid undertaking the painful procedure. To assess this there is value in addressing the following questions:

- What are the anticipated benefits of the procedure?
- Does the procedure achieve the desired benefits?
- If the benefit is for the animals, does a significant proportion of the animals get the benefits?
- How significant are the benefits, i.e. how pressing is the need to remove or modify the body part(s)?
- Do the benefits (e.g. welfare, health, safety, economic, product quality, social) outweigh any harm that is associated with the husbandry procedure?
- Can the same benefits be achieved in other, less invasive, ways, i.e. with less harm?

Regarding the last question, use of pain-relieving drugs has a role, but there are other ways too. First, choosing a method of removing or modifying the body part(s) that causes the least pain and distress (e.g. compared to rubber ring use, surgical castration and/or tail docking of lambs has been shown to be much more painful). Second, choosing an age or stage of development when the pain and distress caused are minimal (e.g. it is generally held that these procedures are less noxious in younger animals, and there is some evidence to support this view). Note that pain and distress still occur with these two strategies, but they are less than would otherwise be the case.

This last point raises the issue of our orientation towards the management of husbandry-induced pain in farm animals. Although our ultimate objective, the "gold standard", is to avoid or prevent such pain

altogether, this ideal will not be practically achievable immediately. Nevertheless, we can make significant progress in reducing the total amount of husbandry pain causes by avoiding such procedures where that is possible, choosing those methods that cause the least pain, applying them at ages or stages of development when pain responses are lower, and using pain-relieving drugs. Note that even with the last of these the outcome usually is pain *reduction* not pain *elimination*.

“Incremental improvement”, therefore, is the realistic objective here, but this objective will only have credibility if it is supported by a strong commitment, from all of those involved, to take animal pain seriously, to be flexible and constructive in re-evaluating the necessity for traditional farming practices that cause pain, to apply scientific knowledge about pain and its alleviation in livestock, and to seek workable regulatory solutions to the economic, safe and knowledgeable use of pain-relieving drugs for these purposes on farms.

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References

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Note that a somewhat modified version of this will appear this month in:

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