



THE STICKY WELFARE WICKET

FARM ANIMAL WELFARE Are We Willing to Rethink How We Do Things?

The 2010 December/January issue of *The Michigan Veterinarian* contained several references to the role of veterinarians in animal welfare. Dr. Lana Kaiser, a member of both the MVMA Food Animal and Animal Welfare Committees, laid out some of the many welfare issues that food animal veterinarians are increasingly being called upon to deal with in the article titled “The Sticky Welfare Wicket.” In addition, any member of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) who follows the AABP listserv has surely seen the huge number of responses generated from a recent inquiry regarding humane euthanasia of cattle. Whether we like it or not, veterinarians and their food-animal clients are facing increased public scrutiny with regard to animal husbandry, particularly in reference to the many routine procedures performed on the farm that have pain associated with them.

Frankly, many veterinarians and their clients tend to take routine livestock procedures (dehorning, castration, foot abscess treatment, etc.) for granted, with little consideration for figuring out new methods to improve upon the way things have always been done. In this day and age, with the ubiquitous presence of cell phones and other recording devices, none of us are immune to scrutiny that could make us look rather bad in the public’s eye. Given the number of individuals and organizations (HSUS, PETA, ALF), with agendas that are often solely for the elimination of animal agriculture, it would be

good for us, as a profession and as individual practitioners, to spend some time and effort reviewing what we do and how we do it. Could we be doing a better job of pain relief than we have been doing in the past and are currently doing now?

In 2008, I wrote an article for *Hoard’s Dairyman* entitled “Would Your Farm’s Dehorning Practices Pass the *60 Minutes* Test?” The article was based on the premise that dehorning calves, at virtually any age, without some sort of tangible effort at analgesia was a practice that would make anyone look pretty bad. It would be particularly difficult to explain why no analgesia was being administered for such a painful procedure, especially if it were being filmed by *60 Minutes*.

You would be surprised at how many responses I received lauding the need to ensure pain mediation for this procedure. As veterinarians, we are supposed to be in the vanguard of good animal husbandry and welfare, and yet many of us have not taken the time to do a ‘pain audit’ for many of the procedures that we routinely perform, such as dehorning and castration. For that matter, how many of us have spent time with clients doing any sort of welfare audit?

National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) is initiating a program entitled FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) that is going to do it for us, and without much veterinary involvement. If we think about it, there are plenty of procedures that we perform

regularly for clients, or train farm employees to perform, that are painful and often done without the benefit of analgesia or anesthesia. Examples include procedures such as dehorning, castration, and the opening of sub-solar abscesses or teats.

If we are doing these procedures, it stands to reason that the use of analgesics, sedatives and anesthetics makes it far less painful for our patients, and usually safer and easier for us. At the same time, it helps us to project a professional image to our clients, with results superior to those that they can attain without our involvement, and promotes our image as compassionate doctors in the public's eyes.

I have often remarked that I would be more than happy to demonstrate dehorning of cattle to any TV news reporter that would wish to accompany me. As any number of clients have stated over the years, between the sedation that the calves are administered and the corneal block they receive, not only do their cattle feel no pain from the procedure, they also don't seem to remember any pain. How many of us could say that about dehorning cattle in a chute, without so much as a corneal block? Certainly those of us who work cattle in a chute quickly note that cattle have long memories for such painful stimuli, and they are difficult, if not impossible, to get to re-enter a chute after an unpleasant dehorning experience. Similarly, most of us are all too familiar with trying to catch and restrain even a relatively docile dairy cow for repeated administration of IVs. It is amazing how quickly cattle are conditioned to be averse to our treatments. If we are not setting the humane example for our clients, when it comes to relief of pain and suffering of our livestock patients, then it is unreasonable to expect that our clients and their employees will be doing so either.

Most of us recognize that our pharmacopeia is woefully short of analgesics, sedatives, and anesthetics labeled for food animals. Nevertheless, we still have enough at our disposal to initiate by example, as well as by dialogue, humane pain management to our clients. Setting a good example is beneficial for both our patients and for the industry as a whole. The good part is, that by setting the example of reducing pain through utilizing our pharmacy and knowledge, not only are we helping to reduce pain and suffering in our patients, we are also setting an example for our clients so that they can appreciate the value of our professional expertise in promoting animal welfare.

As with any decision to use pharmaceuticals in food animals, there are plenty of factors to consider. Certainly the potential for violative residues in meat and milk of treated animals is always a concern. The reality of liability for abuse of dispensed prescription medications is always a concern for any practitioner, along with the potential for a human fatality. While there is no one right way to do things on any given farm operation, the expectations of the public are changing and we must be prepared to meet those expectations before change is imposed on us by legislation or other means. It is simply the right thing to do.

—Keith Sterner, DVM, member, MVMA Food Animal Practice Committee

Invite your legislator to the Animal Issues Briefing. We'll help!

Term limits have changed the way government operates and laws pass in Michigan. The Michigan Legislature has experienced an almost complete turnover following the 2010 campaign cycle. Now is the time to establish relationships with the new lawmakers and ensure they are aware of the issues impacting those who work with animals. Legislators tend to listen to the voters in their districts. Please help make this event a success by inviting your State Representative or State Senator.

WHO: Representatives of the MVMA and the MSU College of Veterinary Medicine

WHAT: Animal Issues Briefing educational session and luncheon

WHEN: Wednesday, May 4, 2011

WHERE: The Anderson House Office Bldg., Mackinac Room (5th Floor), 124 N. Capitol Ave., Lansing, MI 48909

WHY: Now, more than ever, is a time to educate those making decisions regarding animal issues in Michigan—and legislators listen to voters from their own districts.

Please RSVP to Amy Morris at amorris@mwadvocacy.com. We will contact you with information regarding the best way to invite your State Senator and State Representative.

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