

# Ethical issues in the slaughterhouse

**THIS series gives readers the opportunity to consider and contribute to discussion of some of the ethical dilemmas that can arise in veterinary practice. Each month, a case scenario is presented, followed by discussion of some of the issues involved.**

**In addition, a possible way forward is suggested; however, there is rarely a cut-and-dried answer in such cases, and readers may wish to suggest an alternative. This month's dilemma, 'Ethical issues in the slaughterhouse', was submitted and is discussed by John Cranley. Readers with comments to contribute are invited to send them as soon as possible, so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue.**

**The series is being coordinated by Steven McCulloch, a practising vet with a PhD in the ethics of veterinary policy. It aims to provide a framework that will help practitioners find solutions when facing similar dilemmas.**

**John Cranley** has been an Official Veterinarian for four decades and a Named Veterinarian, in medical research, neural science and animal welfare at many institutions. He has worked with a range of species and abattoirs across the UK and Ireland, as well as in practice. He is a diplomate of the European College of Animal Welfare and Behavioural Medicine, and the European Board of Veterinary Specialisation.

## Ethical issues in the slaughterhouse

**An Official Veterinarian is newly employed in a small- to medium-sized, three-species abattoir in rural England. His attention is drawn by an experienced Food Standards Authority meat inspector to the technique of an individual with a UK slaughter certificate of competence, who has been under scrutiny for previous failures to stun cattle adequately as he uses an inaccurately placed captive bolt shot. The slaughterman is again shooting inaccurately, followed by poor exsanguination technique, the slaughterman's technique of stunning lambs using electric narcosis has also been neglectful. Additionally, he has recently refused to handle pigs, previously a major part of his work. The business operator has an expert slaughterer on his staff but is concerned about using him for fear of a counter accusation of prejudice from the reluctant stunner. How can the new OV handle this situation to secure the welfare of every animal and how should enforcement be used to achieve this goal?**

### Issues to consider

It is possible for slaughtermen to become conscientious objectors, disagreeing with the ethics of stunning and so decide to sabotage it. Clearly, the Official Veterinarian (OV) cannot countenance ineffectual stunning, which would be in breach of Article 4.1 of EC Regulation 1099/2009 on protecting animals at slaughter (Council of the European Union 2009). The OV's duty is to assess animal welfare and to instruct the business operator or animal welfare officer to correct failure immediately, wherever it is found (Article 16).

When cattle are shot inaccurately, pain is likely to result if consciousness persists. Accurately sited cap-

until death. This extended period requires an enduring stun, to avoid any resurgence of consciousness.

Rapid bleeding produces unconsciousness and a quick death. In the case outlined, a transverse carotid cut was being performed, which slowed exsanguination compared with 'thoracic stick' which severs the brachiocephalic trunk within the thoracic cavity. However, on staff safety grounds, the business operator may have preferred the severance of the carotids. Pithing cattle, which pulverises the brain and spinal cord using a metal rod inserted through the captive bolt hole, is no longer permitted. A short stun to stick interval is vital to ensure death by blood loss before consciousness can return.

The situation where the business operator fails to ensure humane slaughter at his abattoir because he fears a counter-accusation of prejudice is unconscionable.

The slaughterer's motive to gain status as a conscientious objector may have increased his desire to flout the principles of stunning. Yet a decade earlier he had professed, as a 'fit and proper person', his commitment to stun animals in order to allow a humane slaughter.

### Any thoughts?

Readers with views to contribute on 'Ethical issues in the slaughterhouse' should e-mail them to [inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk](mailto:inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk) so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue. The deadline for receipt of comments is Friday October 27, 2017. Please limit contributions to 200 words.

### Possible way forward

Whatever ethics underpin the actions of a reluctant stunner, or misplaced loyalties that influence the business operator's decisions, the duties of the OV are clear. Under Article 3.1 and Article 4.1 of EC Regulation 1099/2009, the OV must check that animals are protected from avoidable pain during slaughter by assessing quality and duration of stunning until death and ensuring both carotids are severed (Annex III.3 on the bleeding of animals [Council of the European Union 2009]). The OV must formally instruct the business operator to replace the reluctant stunner with the expert slaughterer without delay.

The OV has a duty to acquire evidence to substantiate poor welfare. The case must be reported to the competent authority for investigation. Where competence, knowledge or awareness fails, a certificate of competence issued by the Food Standards Authority (FSA) can be withdrawn, according to Article 22.1c [Council of the

European Union) and reduce suffering. While the investigation process may challenge the OV's relationship with the business operator, the correct approach, which is designed to protect the welfare of each animal, must be followed. Where a case results in prosecution, it may make relationships even more difficult.

One must acknowledge that, under Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, a person can request a FSA certificate of competence to carry out non-stunned slaughter, as part of a religious rite (Article 4 in EC Regulation 1099/2009 [Council of the European Union 2009]). However, the applicant must demonstrate a level of competence to carry out slaughter without causing avoidable pain, distress or suffering (Article 7.1). Theoretically, objectors to stunning can obtain a certificate of competence from the FSA to take part in non-stunned religious slaughter. Nevertheless, where stunning is a legal requirement, a slaughterer must apply



a full stun for the required period to ensure that the animal does not regain consciousness before death.

### Reference

COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (2009) The protection of animals at the time of killing: EC Regulation 1099/2009 (pdf). Council of the European Union. Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009R1099&from=EN> (Accessed 21 September 2017)

doi: 10.1136/inp.j4497



## Ethical issues in the slaughterhouse

John Cranley

*In Practice* 2017 39: 430-431  
doi: 10.1136/inp.j4497

---

Updated information and services can be found at:  
<http://inpractice.bmj.com/content/39/9/430>

---

### Email alerting service

*These include:*

Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

---

### Notes

---

To request permissions go to:  
<http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>

To order reprints go to:  
<http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform>

To subscribe to BMJ go to:  
<http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/>