Helping animals through welfare science

SCIENCE GROUP

RSPCA

Religious Slaughter

RSPCA Farm Animals Department *Information Sheet* **February 2009**

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Introduction

Over 40 million cattle, calves, sheep and pigs, and over 850 million poultry, are slaughtered every year in the UK. The vast majority of these animals are stunned before slaughter but the law allows the Jewish and Muslim communities to slaughter animals by religious methods without any form of stunning. Whilst the RSPCA believes that religious beliefs and practices should be respected, we also believe that animals should only be slaughtered under the most humane conditions.

About religious slaughter

What is religious slaughter?

In the UK, the Jewish and Muslim communities are exempt from a section of the law in '*The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995'* that requires all animals to be stunned before they are slaughtered. Stunning is a process that causes animals to lose consciousness, making them insensible to pain and suffering.

Although there are differences in the way animals are slaughtered by the Shechita (Jewish) and Halal (Muslim) methods, both involve cutting the animal's throat with an very sharp knife, in many cases without any form of stunning. The teachings of the Jewish and Muslim religions state that an animal must be fully alive before it is slaughtered. Accordingly, the stunning of an animal before slaughter may be interpreted as being against such religious teachings.

"Around 90 per cent of Halal slaughter involved pre-stunning."

Within both Jewish and Muslim communities, there are different interpretations of the religious laws. Leaders of some liberal branches of the Jewish faith are prepared to interpret Jewish law in the light of modern customs and knowledge, but others are not. Similarly, some Muslim leaders do not consider that stunning before slaughtering transgresses the laws laid down in the Koran, the Muslim holy book. Other Muslim leaders see it as an offence against law and tradition. Although at the moment no Kosher (acceptable to Jews) meat is produced in the UK from animals that have been stunned before slaughter, the The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) '*Animal Welfare Review'* (March 2004) indicated that, at that time, the majority of cattle (but not other species) killed by the Shechita method received a post-cut stun (see 'Key welfare issues'). Data in the MHS Review also showed that around 90 per cent of Halal slaughter involved pre-stunning.

Number of animals slaughtered by religious methods

The MHS '*Animal Welfare Review'* (March 2004) states that during a one-week period in September 2003, the numbers of animals killed for Kosher (Jewish) meat were 742 cattle and calves, 1,704 lambs and 39,184 poultry. A total of 856 cattle and calves, 139,843 sheep, lambs and goats and 2,136,805 poultry were slaughtered for Halal meat during the same period.

Laws governing religious slaughter

'The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995' sets out specific requirements for the slaughter of animals by the Jewish and Muslim methods. These Regulations implement EC Directive 93/119/EEC. The Regulations state that, amongst other things:

- The animal's throat must be cut by one rapid uninterrupted movement of the knife.
- Both carotid arteries and both jugular veins must be severed.
- The knife used to slaughter the animal must be inspected before each animal is slaughtered to make sure it is of sufficient size and sharpness to slaughter that animal.

Following lobbying by the RSPCA, further amendments to the regulations *('The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing)*

(Amendments) Regulations 1999') also provide that religious slaughter can only take place in a licensed slaughterhouse. This came into force in the UK in March 1999.

Key welfare issues

Slaughter without pre-stunning

In June 2003, the Government's independent advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) published its report on the 'Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing'. The RSPCA considers that the FAWC report provides the best available information on this difficult question. In undertaking a comprehensive review of all red meat slaughter methods, including religious slaughter practices, members of the FAWC considered evidence from many individuals and organisations, including religious and animal welfare groups, as well as observing the various methods of slaughter for themselves.

Their report focused on three particular animal welfare issues with regard to slaughter without pre-stunning. These were:

- pre-slaughter handling
- the potential for pain and distress during exsanguination
- the time to loss of brain responsiveness.

"The RSPCA is opposed to the slaughter of any animal without first rendering it insensible to pain and distress."

On the first of these issues, FAWC concluded that the level of restraint required to expose the throat, perform an effective cut and hold the animal still until it had bled out was far greater than that needed for conventional slaughter.

With regard to the potential for pain and distress, FAWC considered the representations it had received, which had argued that a neck cut is not painful provided it is a rapid, uninterrupted movement carried out with an extremely sharp knife. FAWC came to the view, however, that when a large transverse incision is made across the neck a number of vital tissues are transected including: skin, muscle, trachea, oesophagus, carotid arteries, jugular veins, major nerve trunks, plus numerous minor nerves. They concluded that such a drastic cut would inevitably trigger a barrage of sensory information to the brain in a sensible (conscious) animal. FAWC stated that, "we are persuaded that such a massive injury would result in very significant pain and distress in the period before insensibility supervenes".

On the issue of time taken to loss of brain responsiveness, FAWC considered the available evidence and concluded that sheep become insensible within 5 to 7 seconds of the cut, and adult cattle between 22 and 40 seconds. FAWC cited work on calves which had shown a variation in the period to insensibility from 10 to120 seconds. The longer times were the result of occlusion of the carotid arteries; a process observed in a proportion of cattle, and particularly in calves, which occurs when the carotid arteries contract after the cut has been made and effectively seal the cut ends, thereby maintaining blood pressure in the brain.

Shackled meat chickens prior to slaughter.

Their recommendations were that "Council considers that slaughter without pre-stunning is unacceptable and that the Government should repeal the current exemption", and that "Until the current exemption which permits slaughter without pre-stunning is repealed, Council recommends that any animal not stunned before slaughter should receive an immediate post-cut stun".

In 2004, the Government issued its response to the FAWC's 2003 report in the form of a consultation document. The accompanying statement indicated that the Government was not intending to adopt the FAWC's recommendation to repeal a current legal exemption allowing Halal and Kosher meat to be produced in the UK without the animals being stunned, but that it may consider the issue of labelling of meat (see below) from such slaughter methods – on a voluntary basis. The RSPCA responded to the Government's consultation, urging it to consider more carefully the animal welfare implications of allowing continuation of slaughter without pre-stunning, and pressed for compulsory labelling of meat from animals slaughtered in this way. However, in its final response to the FAWC report in March 2005, the Government again stated that it would not change the law and that slaughter without pre-stunning would continue to be permitted for Jewish and Muslim groups.

Labelling of meat from animals slaughtered by religious methods

It has been estimated that less than half of the meat from animals slaughtered by the Jewish methods is sold in Kosher shops. The consumption of certain parts of the animals' hindquarters such as veins, lymphatic and sciatic nerve and its branches, is forbidden under Jewish law. To remove them is a specialised task, which has not been practised in the UK since the 1930's. Consequently, all hindquarters are rejected as not Kosher, as are any carcasses which cannot be consumed as Kosher meat for other reasons (for example, damage to the carcass). A high proportion of the meat which is declared non-Kosher is therefore sold on the open market but is not labelled as meat from animals that have been slaughtered without pre-stunning.

A previous FAWC report (1985) on religious slaughter highlighted this issue, and recommended that all meat from animals slaughtered by religious methods, and offered for sale "…should be clearly labelled to indicate the method of slaughter." However, the law has not been changed to give effect to this recommendation, though in its statement on the FAWC report, made in March 2005, the Government indicated that it would be willing to discuss the issue of labelling with various stakeholder groups.

The RSPCA takes every opportunity to put forward its view to food retailers and Government (both UK and EU) that, to ensure animals do not suffer, they must always be stunned prior to slaughter.

Work of the RSPCA on this issue

The RSPCA recognises that religious beliefs and practices should be respected. We also believe that it is important to ensure that animals are slaughtered under the most humane conditions possible. Scientific research has clearly demonstrated that slaughter of an animal without stunning can cause unnecessary suffering. Accordingly, the RSPCA is opposed to the slaughter of any food animal without first rendering it insensible to pain and distress until death supervenes.

We continue to press for changes in legislation that would improve the welfare of the animals at the time of slaughter. Until this occurs, the RSPCA proposes that:

- The Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK should review their slaughter practices. In New Zealand, for example, all animals slaughtered by the Halal method are stunned before slaughter and all animals slaughtered by the Kosher method are stunned shortly after the incision is made in the animal's neck. The progress already made in the UK in these areas should be extended to cover all animals slaughtered.
- All meat produced from animals that have not been stunned before slaughter should be clearly labelled in some way, so that it can be identified by consumers. The RSPCA believes that consumers have the right to choose whether or not they wish to buy meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning.

Sheep in a lairage prior to slaughter.

Recommended further information

- RSPCA Farm Animals Department information sheet on '*Slaughter of Red Meat Animals*'.
- RSPCA Farm Animals Department information sheet on the '*Slaughter of Poultry*'.
- FAWC report on '*The Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing - Part 1: Red Meat Animals*'
- FAWC report on '*The Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods*'.

How you can help!

If you, like the RSPCA, are concerned about this issue, please write concisely in your own words to your MP, and to:

The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affair
Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
LONDON SW1P 3JR.

expressing your concerns about the welfare of animals slaughtered without prior stunning, and asking them to implement all of the recommendations in the 2003 FAWC report.

You can also help by writing to food retailers to ask about their policies regarding the sale and labelling of meat from animals that were not pre-stunned.