



Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

FAI Technical Datasheet S4 Castration in Lambs - Update August 2005

Mutilations are a major cause for concern amongst the public as these are often legally carried out without anaesthetic and are known to be painful. Male lambs are routinely castrated unless they are required for breeding. This practice is carried out to prevent entire lambs becoming sexually mature. When rams reach puberty there are perceived problems with meat quality and management although research shows that there is no taste difference between entire and castrated lambs.

'the facts.....'

Castration is a painful procedure known to cause behavioural and physiological changes indicative of both acute and chronic pain, and also longer term increased sensitivity to pain.^{1, 2} It is therefore a significant welfare problem.

The most common methods of castration are;

- Application of a tight rubber ring to restrict blood supply to the testes and scrotum (in the first week of life only).
- Application of bloodless castrators (Burdizzo) which crush the blood supply, and nerves, to the testes.
- Surgical castration where a blade is used to open the scrotum and remove the testicles.

Research suggests that the most painful method of castration is surgical¹ and that there may be some reduction in overall pain if a combination of crushing with the bloodless castrators and a rubber ring is used.² Pain control is not routinely used on farms because of the expense and extra time involved.

Lambs can legally be castrated without anaesthetic up to 3 months of age. There is currently no method of castration which is not painful including those using local anaesthetics and/or analgesics.

Although male hormones can cause a taint in meat, there is evidence that meat from entire lambs is of comparable quality to that from castrated and female lambs.³ Other studies have reported that meat from uncastrated lambs does have different properties.

Finishing groups of entire lambs can cause management problems in terms of fighting, unwanted mating and carcass conformation if they reach puberty (about 5-6 months) before attaining the weight required for slaughter. These problems mean that the majority of farmers use castration as a management tool.



'.... the FAI response!'

After extensive review of the literature FAI are of the opinion that it is not possible to castrate lambs without significant pain. This includes methods using the use of local anaesthetics and analgesics. Thus at the moment our only route forwards is not to castrate.

As we have had a breeding policy change (see S7) we have chosen to castrate lambs in 2005 and explore the technique known as 'short scrotum' which means applying a rubber ring in the first week of life to the scrotum below the testes to hold the testes firmly against the body wall. This technique is widely used in New Zealand as it allows the benefits of male hormone in the growth of the lambs to be used whilst in theory making the lambs infertile due to the testes being too hot to produce viable sperm. FAI in conjunction with Ruth Clements of Edinburgh University have obtained funding from UFAW to look at the welfare aspects of this technique.

Taste trials will be carried out on castrated and uncastrated lambs of varying ages throughout 2005 as the issue of 'strong' male lamb is not satisfactorily resolved (see left). This is a major issue as if entire lamb has any eating quality problems this will be a major barrier for consumers

1. Thornton PD & Waterman-Pearson AE 1999 Research in Veterinary Science 66: 2, 107-118
2. Kent JE, Molony V & Robertson IS 1995 Veterinary Record 136: 8, 192-196
3. Butler-Hogg BW et al 1984 Animal Production 39: 1, 107-113



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