



Clip wins in mulesing pain debate

Many factors are at play when deciding whether an animal is suffering, writes PAUL HEMSWORTH

If we are interested in a rational discussion on alternatives to husbandry and housing practices for farm animals — and if we want to genuinely address their welfare — it is critical to use what science can tell us.

One of the reasons for concerns about husbandry practices is pain.

Measuring pain is complex. Some of the well-accepted behavioural indicators of pain include guarding of affected areas, vocalising, excessive licking, biting or scratching, reluctance to move and changes in sleeping and feeding behaviour.

But other conditions in animals may have similar behavioural signs, for example, sickness, fear

and chronic stress.

Increases in the so-called stress hormones, such as cortisol, have been used by many researchers as indicators of pain. But it should be recognised although the perception of pain will be reflected in a physiological stress response (such as a cortisol increase), other non-painful elements, such as restraint by humans, may also result in an acute stress response.

Issues of animal welfare are broader than pain. It is the magnitude of behavioural and physiological responses that can be used to measure the risk to animal welfare.

The Animal Welfare

Science Centre studied the welfare implications of several alternatives to mulesing, including skin occlusion clips.

In an experiment examining the effects of this clip treatment, extensive observations on the postures and behaviour of lambs were carried out.

Cortisol concentrations were measured to assess the magnitude of the stress response. Haaptoglobin, a blood protein that increases in response to inflammation and tissue trauma, was also measured, along with weight gain and gait.

To assess the impact of this clip treatment, the effects of clips and surgical mulesing were compared with

measurements on "control" lambs, which were placed in the mulesing cradle then released without any treatment.

In comparison with the control lambs, those that were surgically mulesed had reduced feeding behaviour up to two weeks after treatment, and increased lying behaviour for up to one week.

They also had increased cortisol and haaptoglobin concentrations for up to four days, reduced weight gain, and disrupted gait three days after treatment.

In contrast, apart from a brief cortisol increase immediately after treatment, lambs that received the clip showed

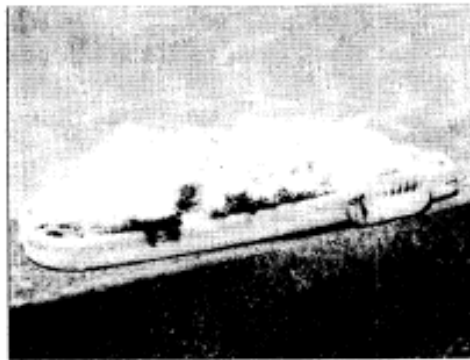
similar behaviour, cortisol and haaptoglobin concentrations, growth rate and gait as lambs in the control treatment.

In summary, the clip treatment had only a brief and moderate impact on the biology of lambs.

This contrasts with surgical mulesing, which substantially affected the biology of lambs for a number of days.

The clip treatment provides distinct welfare advantages over conventional surgical mulesing.

• Prof Paul Hemsworth is director of the University of Melbourne's Animal Welfare Science Centre



Making the cut: lambs coped with clips better than surgical mulesing



Facts back wool clips

PAULA Hough, from PETA, states (WV, March 5) that lambs undergoing clipping, an alternative procedure to mulesing, "are still suffering greatly and sickly".

On what basis does she make this assessment of lamb suffering? What is her evidence?

If we are interested in a rational discussion on alternatives to current husbandry and housing practices for farm animals and if we want to genuinely address the welfare of these animals, it is critical to use the facts.

Australian Wool Innovation has funded the Animal Welfare Science Centre, a joint centre of the University of Melbourne, Monash University and the Department of Primary Industries (Victoria), to study the welfare implications of several alternatives to mulesing, including the skin occlusion clips, referred to as clipping.

The results of the research, which are being prepared for publication in a scientific journal, have been reported to a number of groups including industry, Australian Veterinary Association and the RSPCA.

This comprehensive research, in which pain and stress in lambs were assessed on the basis of their behaviour and physiology, indicated that this clip treatment had only a mild, brief impact on the biology of lambs and it was concluded that the welfare risks were minor.

Indeed, the lambs treated with clips often responded in a similar manner to those in the "control" treatment, that is, where clips were not applied.

These are the facts.

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