

U OF S RESEARCHER WORKS TO MAKE ROUTINE PROCEDURES BOTH ANIMAL AND HANDLER FRIENDLY

Cutting back on routine pain

By Mihiri De Silva

Without a proper understanding of how common procedures affect livestock, farm animals can sometimes be subjected to routine, unnecessary pain. But a University of Saskatchewan (U of S) researcher is developing new ways to gauge animal comfort, and coming up with new practices that are good for animals and producers alike.

Prof. Joseph Stookey, an animal behaviourist at the U of S, is interested in quantifying cattle and swine pain during and after routine on-farm management practices. He believes that if feasible, less painful alternatives are established, producers can make informed decisions when castrating, dehorning, weaning and branding their animals.

“I’m trying to get a better understanding of pain in animals so ultimately the process of controlling pain is easy and practical for producers,” says Stookey.

Stookey uses video surveillance, restraint-strain gauges and animal vocal responses to detect levels of pain intensity. This approach shows castration and dehorning inflict significantly more pain when animals are older than when they are younger. From an animal welfare perspective it means bull calves should be castrated before weaning and before they reach the feedlot.

Long-term pain during recovery from routine procedures is also poorly understood and often subjectively scored, or the assessment has traditionally been made by looking for changes in post-operative eating and sleeping habits, says Stookey. By adding more sensitive measures to assess chronic pain, such as changes in stride length of the animal, Stookey says he can better assess recovery time.

But, whether considering chronic or acute pain, Stookey emphasizes the importance of open communication with producers — handlers know their animals best, and can pick up subtle behavioral cues. These cues can be adapted as pain indicators, which can be very important to pain management efforts.

Although quantifying pain may identify alternative methods, it won’t always convince producers to adopt the most animal-



Dr. Joe Stookey

friendly options because the least painful procedures are often the least feasible for producers.

“Administering anesthetic to individual piglets before tail and teeth clipping is unreasonable for handlers because of the extra handling and extra time,” says Stookey, citing an example.

Stookey’s second research focus addresses this welfare hurdle. Once pain is quantified, Stookey works to develop pain-control options that appeal to producers. For example, he is currently investigating if pain medication can be safely passed through the sow’s milk to her piglets, minimizing discomfort and handling stress during tail and teeth clipping.

In 2002, Stookey and former graduate student Dr. Derek Haley introduced the Canadian beef industry to an animal-friendly and practical two-stage weaning method (QuietWean). They used a small, non-invasive plastic flap that, when attached to a calf’s nostrils, prevents access to a cow’s udder. The gradual separation of calf and cow by first denying milk, results in less stress and health complications for both cow and calf. The anti-suckling tool is a good example of how practical, animal-friendly options are quickly incorporated into practice once they are identified.

Although making routine farm practices entirely painless and stress free is unlikely, Stookey says minimizing suffering isn’t asking too much. He continues to uncover ways to quantify pain among animals and develop easy-to-use, affordable strategies for pain relief.

“Minimizing livestock pain from routine practices isn’t just a choice,” says Stookey, “it’s our responsibility.”

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Calf with weaning tool & Dr. Haley