BVA briefing on Westminster Hall debate:
“Debate on an e-petition relating to ending non-stun slaughter to promote animal welfare”
(Philip Hollobone, Con, Kettering)
4.30pm, Monday 23 February 2015

Background: BVA’s HM Government e-petition

On January 29 BVA’s e-petition to end non-stun slaughter to promote animal welfare reached 100,000 signatures showing an enormous strength of feeling amongst the public for this important animal welfare issue. The total number of signatures has now reached over 113,000.

The e-petition calls for:
• an end to slaughter without pre-stunning for all animals, without exception

But while non-stun slaughter continues the e-petition also calls for:
• clearer slaughter-method labelling (noting that over 80% of halal slaughter is pre-stunned and that the hindquarters of animals killed by the (non-stun) shechita method are not kosher and therefore unlabelled)
• post-cut stunning to improve the welfare of animals that are not pre-stunned

Widespread support

In addition to the massive public support for the campaign our position is supported by Federation of Veterinarians of Europe, Farm Animal Welfare Committee, Humane Slaughter Association, RSPCA, SSPCA and Compassion In World Farming (CIWF).

Scientific evidence to support pre-stunning for animal welfare

There is clear scientific evidence that slaughter without pre-stunning causes pain and distress. Behavioural and brain scanning research reveals that animals experience pain when their neck is cut and they inhale their own blood which causes pain and distress.

Slaughter without pre-stunning causes a delay to loss of consciousness. It can take up to 2 minutes for cattle to lose consciousness; up to 20 seconds in sheep; up to 2½ minutes or more in poultry; and sometimes 15 minutes or more in fish. Pre-stunning delivers an instant loss of consciousness.

Research examples and key quotes:

• The EU-funded Dialrel project (2006-2010) (von Holleben and others 2010): “It can be stated with high probability that animals feel pain during and after the throat cut without prior stunning.” “Additionally pain, suffering and distress during the cut and bleeding are highly likely”.

• Defra/NZ MAF research study (Gibson and others 2009): “Consciousness, and therefore the ability of the animal to feel pain and experience distress after the incision, may persist for 60 seconds or longer in cattle. These observations suggest that livestock may experience pain and distress during the period before they become unconscious (insensible).”
• European Food Safety Authority (2004): “The animals which are slaughtered have systems for detecting and feeling pain and, as a result of the cut and the blood loss, if not stunned, their welfare will be poor because of pain, fear and other adverse effects.” “Poor welfare also results when conscious animals inhale blood because of bleeding into the trachea.”

• Farm Animal Welfare Council (2003): “We are persuaded that such a massive injury [throat cutting] would result in very significant pain and distress in the period before insensibility supervenes.”

Legal position and other countries

EU and UK law requires farm animals to be stunned before slaughter. However, there is an exemption for religious slaughter.

EU law on slaughter is contained in Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 on the Protection of Animals at the Time of Killing. The Regulation (which came into force on 1 Jan 2013) allows Member States to apply a derogation to permit slaughter without stunning for religious and traditional purposes. This can be decided at a Member State level and all parts of the UK apply the derogation.

• Slaughter without prior stunning has been banned in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Denmark.
• Austria, Estonia, Finland and Slovakia require stunning immediately after the incision if the animal has not been stunned before.
• In Germany abattoirs have to prove the ‘religious needs’ and number of animals to be slaughtered to satisfy the needs of the religious community concerned before being granted a licence.
• Under Australian law stunning at slaughter is required but there is an option for a state or meat inspection authority to provide an exemption and approve an abattoir for ritual slaughter without prior stunning for the domestic market: post-cut stunning is a requirement for these animals.

Statistics

From a welfare perspective individual animals are more important than the tonnage of meat. Complete statistics on religious slaughter are not kept. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) carried out a survey of slaughterhouses in September 2013. The results (published January 2015) indicated that in 2013:

• 3% of poultry were not stunned = 31 million animals
• 15% of sheep and goats were not stunned = 2.4 million animals
• 2% of cattle were not stunned = 44,000 animals

With the Muslim and Jewish communities comprising just 4-5% of the British population it is clear that a significant proportion of sheep and goat meat from non-stun slaughter is going outside the communities for which it was intended - contrary to EU and UK legislation.

Labelling stunned and non-stunned meat

BVA does not support calls to compulsorily label meat as ‘Halal’ or ‘Kosher’ because this would not help consumers. Over 80% of halal slaughter is pre-stunned and the hindquarters of animals killed by the (non-stun) shechita method are not kosher and therefore unlabelled.

Labels should therefore refer to “stunned” or “non-stunned”. Defra Minister George Eustice said in a Westminster Hall debate on 4 November 2014 “…from the EU perspective, ‘stunned’ has a clear legal definition in the legislation, and it is simply that an animal is rendered insensible to pain
almost immediately. That is a clear definition and the scientific evidence does not support the argument that a cut without prior stunning achieves that.”

The EU Commission is currently undertaking a study on the possibility of providing consumers with information on the stunning of animals and results are expected in early 2015.

**Improving welfare through post-cut stunning**

While pre-cut stunning is superior in terms of animal welfare, should non-stun slaughter continue to be permitted, post-cut stunning offers a valid means of reducing the suffering of animals at slaughter. The option of post-cut stunning is not equivalent to pre-cut stunning, but presents a desirable refinement if government policy does not change.

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**Key questions for the Minister**

- Does the Government agree that all animals should be stunned before slaughter for animal welfare reasons?
- Why is the Government allowing non-stunned meat to go outside of the communities for which it was intended contrary to EU and UK legislation?
- Will the Government support the introduction of compulsory labelling of meat, fish and products from non-stun slaughter as ‘non-stun’?
- Will the Government look at introducing mandatory post-cut stunning as they have in some countries, including Finland, Austria, Estonia, Slovakia and Australia?
- Will the Government consider the German approach of abattoirs having to prove the ‘religious’ needs and define the number of animals to be slaughtered to satisfy the needs of the religious community concerned before being granted a licence?

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**More information**

If you require further information ahead of the debate please contact the BVA public affairs team:

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