

BVA and SVS response to AWC review of castration and tail docking of lambs

Introduction

1. BVA is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom and has over 18,000 members. Our primary aim is to represent, support and champion the interests of the veterinary profession in this country, and we therefore take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory issues and employment matters.
2. The Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS) is a specialist division of BVA which promotes the prevention of disease and the welfare of sheep by providing a forum for discussion, distribution of research results and provision of advice on veterinary matters relating to sheep.
3. We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the AWC review of castration and tail docking of lambs. In 2017, as part of the BVA Animal Welfare Strategy we developed a list of priority animal welfare d

to management practices and decisions farmers make when considering castration and tail docking. Management practices are heavily influenced by the following:

Growth rates of lambs in some situations where lambs have faster growth rates the option to finish early to go for slaughter means some farmers may choose not to castrate or tail dock as the risk of taint or fly strike is reduced.

Purpose some lambs may be retained for breeding, either within the flock or sold as breeding ewes. Farmers may be influenced to tail-dock breeding sheep which are likely to be sold to areas where the risk of fly strike may be higher. Lambs which are being sold as stores and fattened in mixed sex groups may influence decisions on castration.

Breeds some traditional breeds, largely hill breeds, are not tail docked.

Location location and climatic factors may increase the risk of fly strike which in turn may influence the decisions to tail dock.

5. There are currently no analgesics and a very limited number of anaesthetics licensed for use in sheep within the UK which greatly reduces the potential for use. Although they can be prescribed by vets under the cascade, provided appropriate withdrawal periods are observed, the lack of licensed products available for pain relief in sheep is a key consideration which directly impacts on welfare. We would like to see local analgesics and anaesthetics with currently established use in sheep licensed as such in the UK.
6. Through the Agriculture Bill, the sheep sector will receive public money to support public goods including investment in animal health and welfare. This investment at home should not be undermined by trade deals which allow goods produced to lower standards of animal health and welfare, to undercut UK producers on price. We have raised concerns as part of our submission to the House of Lords EU International Agreements Sub-Committee in relation to UK-New Zealand Trade Negotiations³ and will continue to call for high standards of animal health, welfare and food hygiene to be prioritised within any trade negotiations.
7. Alongside colleagues at SVS, we would be happy to discuss the content of our submission further with AWC, should that be useful to the review.



³ <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/3793/bva-submission-to-the-house-of-lords-eu-international-agreements-sub-committee-uk-nz-trade-negotiations-final-v2->

The Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2007⁶ allows for castration and tail docking but does not specify the method or apply age restrictions.

The Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012⁷ allows for:

Castration using a rubber ring or other device to constrict the flow of blood to the scrotum on animals aged not more than seven days. When any other method is used it shall only be used up to the age of three months

Tail docking using a rubber ring or other device to constrict the flow of blood to the tail on animals aged not more than seven days. When any other method is used it shall only be used up to the age of three months.

Historical Background

Castration has been traced back to around 4000 years BCE at around the time that the domestication of sheep for the purposes of managed wool and milk production intensified⁸. The perceived benefits include a reduction in undesirable aggressive behaviour and ease of management alongside the more obvious goal of the prevention of unwanted pregnancies.

Docking appears to be a later practice, not appearing in records until the 16th or 17th centuries, its main purpose seems to have been the reduction of faecal or urine contamination in the longer-woolled breeds that began to be prevalent at that time.

Current Practice

The essential reasons for both castration and tail-docking have altered little with time.

Castration to avoid unwanted pregnancies

Castration may be needed to prevent unwanted pregnancies in a mixed-sex flock. This can arise where the overall management of the farm means that a mixed-sex group is the best way to rear lambs prior to sale or slaughter. Hill breeds in particular, being slow growing, may reach sexual maturity before the desired slaughter weight. While animals can be segregated into same-sex flocks, this may not be convenient depending upon grazing availability and potential markets for lamb meat⁹.

Castration to avoid ram taint

Taint of meat is due to the presence of skatoles in the fat that may contribute to an unpleasant taste. Although there is some evidence that the skatole concentration is greater in the fat of entire rams compared to castrate ram lambs, the concentration is also considered to be below the detection threshold¹⁰.

As sheep are seasonal breeders, the onset of breeding activity, rather than the absolute age of the ram is the more significant factor when assessing the likelihood of taint. Castration is unnecessary where lambs will be finished and sent to slaughter before they reach sexual maturity. Castration to avoid ram

Surgical castration - the testes are completely removed via an incision in the scrotum, with or without cutting, clamping or cauterising the spermatic cords. The FAWC report 1994 concluded that surgical castration caused significantly more distress than other methods. This position was reiterated in 2008¹⁵. In addition to the acute and chronic pain associated with the surgical procedure, there is a significantly increased risk of infection in comparison to the rubber ring method. There is also risk of severe haemorrhage, and risk of prolapse of intestinal loops.

Clamp (Burdizzo) castration the spermatic cords are crushed by application of a clamp to the neck of the scrotum. When properly applied for the appropriate length of time blood supply is obstructed and innervation of tissue beyond the crush is destroyed. This method may be used up

shown to cause acute pain in lambs of any age¹⁸. Although evidence suggests that the pain associated with tail docking by this method is less than that caused by rubber ring castration, it is still considerable. The debilitating nature of acute pain can mean that very young lambs may ingest insufficient quantities of colostrum, predisposing the lamb to a range of diseases.

Surgical docking part of the tail is removed with a sharp knife. Studies of behavioural and cortisol responses show that surgical docking causes significantly more pain compared with other docking methods, and as such the FAWC report 2008 recommended that surgical docking by anyone other than a veterinary surgeon should be prohibited.

Hot docking iron the tail is severed using a purpose-

potential infections may outweigh any welfare benefits, although using a sterimatic device can provide a solution.

A device that delivers local anaesthetic and applies a rubber ring has been developed, which is of benefit in overcoming issues of practical delivery of local anaesthetic to large numbers of lambs. It has not yet been launched in the UK.