Methods for dispatching backyard poultry

The range of low-cost methods available to the small producer for dispatching small numbers of poultry is limited. None of the commonly used methods is satisfactory as there are doubts that they fully protect the welfare of the bird. There are humane methods available but they involve some initial capital outlay.

Probably the most common method is ‘neck pulling’ (cervical dislocation). If carried out correctly this method should cause extensive damage to the brainstem and render the bird instantly unconscious. This should be followed by exsanguination to ensure the blood vessels in the neck have been severed and the bird is dead. Cervical dislocation may be acceptable for small numbers of birds if it is carried out by an experienced operator who is fully confident of performing the technique quickly and effectively. With the great increase in interest in hobby/small-scale production of poultry, there is a need for information and training for keepers so that they have the expertise to ensure that the technique is carried out correctly every time. Research (Gregory and Wotton 1990) has shown that it is doubtful whether cervical dislocation causes immediate unconsciousness in poultry, particularly when there has not been complete separation of the neck and destruction of the brainstem. In particular, applying the procedure to larger birds is more difficult. For these reasons cervical dislocation is not suitable for routine use, but it is acceptable under emergency conditions where no better method is available, provided the person carrying it out is experienced in the technique.

Another method still (if rarely) used for dispatching poultry is decapitation. The neck is severed close to the head using an instrument which should be designed specifically for that purpose and should apply sufficient pressure to ensure rapid severance of the neck in the correct position in one go. However, research has shown that in birds there may be some brain function for up to 30 seconds after decapitation (Gregory and Wotton 1986), which makes this method unacceptable in welfare terms. Exsanguination without stunning is also unacceptable.

Another method unacceptable to the Humane Slaughter Association (HSA) is neck crushing using a set of pliers designed for the purpose. These are often marketed as ‘humane dispatchers’ but there is no scientific evidence that neck crushing produces immediate unconsciousness. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that neck crushing is less effective at disrupting brain function than cervical dislocation (Gregory and Wotton 1990). Until there is evidence that this method results in immediate unconsciousness, it is not considered acceptable on welfare grounds.

A cartridge-operated device (Cash Poultry Killer; Accles & Shelvoke) that applies a severe blow to the bird’s skull to render it immediately unconscious is available. When applied correctly the blow will kill the bird. Used correctly, this is a reliable, humane method and is more effective at reducing brain activity than cervical dislocation or neck crushing. To comply with current legislation, when this method is used the birds must thereafter be bled (by severing the major blood vessels of the neck) or have their necks dislocated.

Another humane method is to stun, using a low-voltage hand-held electric stunner with electrodes that are applied either side of the bird’s head, followed by immediate slaughter (bleeding). While the operating cost of this method is low, as with the mechanical device outlined above, the initial cost of the equipment may deter some small producers. This method may not be appropriate for all smallholders because of the need for an electricity supply.

The HSA provides information on and recommends the use of either of the last two methods by smallholders for the slaughter of poultry. There is a need for further research into the possibility of developing a low-tech, low-cost and high-welfare system for dispatching small numbers of poultry.

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