OVs are a moral checkpoint

UNDERCOVER filming by an animal rights group recently caught footage of slaughterhouse workers shouting out to fellow co-workers: ‘The vet’s coming.’ Cue a flurry of activity, with animals cleared from an overstocked pen and a false impression of ‘business as usual’ created for the inspecting vet.

This scenario illustrates two important realities. First, the vet, as the independent authority in a meat production plant, has some clout. Official Veterinarians (OVs) can halt the ‘production line’ at any point from lairage to postmortem inspection. This has implications for throughput, efficiency and, ultimately, profit for food business operators (FBOs).

Second, some abattoir staff will cut corners if they can. No surprise, given they are paid per item processed so the more they can achieve, the more they will be paid.

Time pressure could be a factor behind some of the welfare abuses carried out by staff in UK abattoirs, as captured by Animal Aid’s recent report ‘Britain’s Failing Slaughterhouses’. It catalogues a wide range of abuses captured by undercover filming across all types of abattoirs, from small family-run operations to multi-plant companies.

These include workers punching and kicking animals in the head; burning them with cigarettes; beating them with paddles and broom handles and deliberately giving them powerful electric shocks through their ears, tails, abdomens and open mouths.

It is against this backdrop that the Association of Meat suppliers (AIMS) is arguing for a reduction in veterinary presence until they do. As such, the idea for reduced veterinary presence has little support, even from within its own industry – for the very powerful reason that UK consumers would find a two-tier system of inspection unpalatable.

This year shows a range of serious animal welfare breaches, from overcrowding pens to ineffective stunning. According to Eville & Jones, which supplies OVs and meat inspectors to abattoirs, the need for an official veterinary presence is demonstrated daily.

The irony here is that the solution to many of the industry’s key challenges is actually the OV. Too often they are regarded as a cost in an accounting line but, when given the chance, they can increase efficiency and profits.

So while the review continues, there are a couple of common sense measures that the industry can just get on and implement. They could end the use of group stunning pens and ensure all abattoirs use reducing systems to better manage the flow of animals. This would improve efficiency but, importantly, reduce the likelihood of abuse (because operatives do not have to chase animals in pens).

They could also start to pay operatives by the hour not by ‘headage’. This would remove time pressures so they are not incentivised to take shortcuts.

In seeking to modernise meat inspection, AIMS appears to be on the money. There seems to be agreement that we could move towards a more risk-based approach to inspection. Postmortem inspections could be reviewed – there is some criticism they are too focused on quality, rather than safety. And, where vets work in partnership with industry, improvements can be made.

But it is unlikely that the UK consumer will tolerate even the perception of a dumming down of our meat inspection processes or a move to self-regulation by FBOs.

Abattoirs do not have the best reputations as workplaces – according to insiders, bullying and harassment is rife and it must be brutalising to work surrounded by death and killing every day.

The permanent presence of an independent vet challenges the culture of an abattoir. If they see something wrong, they can halt operations. As such, OVs constitute an important moral checkpoint.

It strikes me that the permanent presence of a vet is a force for good in a place where no-one else really wants to be.

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