Sheep Mulesing and Animal Lib

Nancy Heneson

The practice of mulesing sheep to prevent blowfly strike has recently come under fire from the Animal Liberation movement in Australia. Although it is only one of the many issues which Animal Lib has raised in its campaign to reform various sectors of the livestock industry, it is particularly illustrative of the kinds of conflicts in world view which arise when animal rights activists turn the spotlight on the farming establishment. Spokesmen for the livestock industries are quick to stress the emotional and sometimes sensational portrayal by Animal Libbers of time-honored animal management practices, as well as the sinister role of the urban press. Animal Libbers, on the other hand, profess a desire to reach a reasonable compromise with the farming community while at the same time proposing legislation which could have serious economic repercussions for the farmer and the consumer. Both sides offer valid arguments, but the debate is often frustrated by a mutual lack of sensitivity and an incomplete understanding of the context in which the other group is operating. Issues which combine economics, social attitudes, ethics and politics are seldom, if ever, clear-cut.

Why is Mulesing Practiced?

Mulesing is an operation in which sections of skin as wide as 164 mm and as deep as 94 mm are cut from the buttocks and tail of unanesthetized lambs, usually at marking (2 - 10 weeks) or weaning (4 - 5 months). These areas are stripped to avoid fly and maggot infestation (breec...
philosophical purists, whether their philosophy falls to the left of Animal Liberation or to the right of the hard-core dominionist. However, those who are most directly affected by the changes wrought from the debate between industry and the champions of reform are the farmer, the consumer and the animals themselves. When the needs of more than one group are taken into account, compromise is the most likely outcome.

The farmer may understand his or her animals better than the animal rights philosophers, the animal welfare lobbyist, or the managers of corporate agribusiness. Yet such familiarity with the object of concern does not necessarily imply that other sectors of society should have little or no part in trying to resolve the larger ethical questions of animal exploitation. Animal Lib may not have all the answers, but that does not preclude its ability to serve as a societal watchdog. In order to have maximum impact, however, its efforts must be backed up by data from applied animal welfare science as well as a thorough understanding of the economic arguments of producers and other representatives of the livestock industry. As stated by Wal Shaw, President of the Australian Broiler Growers Council, in an interview with National Farmer (November 29, 1979): “The Animal Lib stir has caused us to look at ourselves — and that’s not a bad thing at all.”

Following consideration of the report of the Brambell Committee, the British government in 1968 took powers under Part I of the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968 to prevent the infliction of unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress to livestock on agricultural land; to make regulations with respect to the welfare of such livestock where such a course was considered appropriate; and to prepare codes of recommendations for the welfare of livestock and to “spend such sums as he (the Minister) thinks fit on the giving of advice, free of charge, to persons concerned with livestock on matters relating to the welfare of livestock.” Thus it was that the State Veterinary Service (SVS) was given responsibilities for the surveillance of the welfare of livestock kept for farming purposes.

In addition to economic pressures, the virtual eradication of such diseases as tuberculosis and the complete eradication of others, e.g., swine fever, has encouraged livestock owners to invest with greater confidence in larger individual livestock units or complexes of such units. These intensive systems are characterized by more animals per unit, less space per animal and mechanical equipment replacing some of the personnel attending to the animals. One man is thus enabled to look after very many animals. We must never forget the importance of that man, the stockman. His competence with and sympathy for his livestock is crucial for their well being. Paradoxically that very confidence to enlarge has meant that today the size of individual units with high stocking densities under systems of intensive management presents problems of entirely different dimensions than in the past in both the disease and welfare context.

There are aspects of certain husbandry systems which to some observers come very close to the dividing line between necessary pain and distress and that which can be described as unnecessary, if the infliction of pain and distress can ever be described as wholly necessary except in very well defined circumstances. It is in this area that most of the problems for the SVS arise, particularly in the determination of whether or not unnecessary pain or distress is being caused.

The philosophy of the SVS approach to livestock inspection is two-fold. First, we believe that animal welfare is inseparable from the majority, if not all, of our work with domestic farm livestock. Indeed as veterinary surgeons, we take an oath “that my constant endeavor will be to the welfare of animals committed to my care.” Second, we believe that prosecution under the 1968 Act should be used as a last resort when all else has failed. That is why since 1968 there have been few prosecutions. We try first of all to be advisers and in advising we seek the help of the owner’s own veterinary surgeon and other colleagues in the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) such as the environmental specialists, the nutritionists, and the surveyors, all of whom are always willing to cooperate.

The specific welfare content of our efforts to achieve these objectives can be divided into two separate parts:

i. “Police” action which is taken in response to the discovery of adverse welfare conditions found at routine inspections or following the investigation of complaints;

ii. The promotion of positive health which can, I believe, be considered to be the study of the relationship between particular systems of animal husbandry and management standards and the need to improve