

K4

Animal welfare at transport and slaughter

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An increasing number of reports on serious violation of animal welfare in pig slaughterhouses has had significant impact on consumer behaviour concerning meat products in the past year. NGOs have been documenting the violation of animal welfare and cruel handling of animals in slaughterhouses throughout Europe and media has been reporting on these issues. This has led to shutdowns of plants and the prosecution of food business operators and veterinarians in some cases. Due to the broad publicity of the “scandals”, governments responsible for inspections in slaughterhouses are being urged to take action. Why did inspections carried out by official veterinarians in these slaughterhouses fail? Do veterinarians on the plants receive adequate support by their competent authorities to stand up to the pressure of food business operators (FBOs) concerning animal welfare issues? Which steps will increase FBOs understanding to recognise the relevance of animal welfare during slaughter and carry responsibility?

Legal responsibility for animal welfare in slaughterhouses

The responsibility for complying with animal welfare requirements on behalf of the FBO has been strengthened by the European Hygiene Regulations (EG) No. 853 and 854/2004 and Regulation (EG) No. 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing. FBOs are obliged to take the necessary measures to avoid pain and minimise distress and suffering for the animals in the slaughterhouses. The appointed animal welfare officer (AWO) defines the sensitive areas and operations dealing with animals according to Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs). He/She ensures that staff has an appropriate level of competence for its occupation and is trained concerning to the SOPs. In general, large companies can assess the relevance of employing qualified AWOs and the importance of SOPs. The risk of the companies` image being damaged by negative press is too high. Small slaughterhouses or butcheries however often lack understanding for these issues. They officially define SOPs and formally appoint an AWO, but finally the responsibility of keeping animal welfare under surveillance remains to the official veterinarian on the plant. Unfortunately the official veterinarians are often understaffed and are not in an adequate position to ensure compliance with animal welfare without support of the FBOs and the competent authorities.

Official veterinarians in slaughterhouses in Germany

European legislation does not differentiate between official veterinarians that mainly work in district offices and those working in slaughterhouses full- or part-time. The European food hygiene regulations refer to “official veterinarians” in general. In the German version official veterinarians are called “beamtete/r Tierarzt”. German national legislation, however, differentiates between “Amtstierarzt” (ATA) and “amtlicher Tierarzt” (amtl. TA). The ATA works in a competent authority and has usually successfully passed training including exams in veterinary legislation and its enforcement. The ATA carries out assignments for the competent authority. One of these are inspections of slaughterhouses at least once a year.

The veterinarians working in slaughterhouses and on meat plants on a daily basis are called “amtliche TA” (amtl. TA). They are employed by district offices and their field of activity is restricted to specific slaughterhouses or meat plants. According to European hygiene legislation, the requirement for amtl. TA to work in slaughterhouses is 200 h of experience for inspections. The amtl. TA have usually not been trained specifically for European hygiene or animal welfare legislation and possible enforcement measures and consequently depend on their district offices for the prosecution of offenses. The amtl. TA can be paid according to two specific wage agreements. One of the agreements determines that payment is continued only for 6 days after the shutdown of a plant. Consequently, this agreement can influence the willingness of the amtl. TA to report infringements to their competent authorities as they may be sawing off their own branch.

Another reason for amtl. TA in slaughterhouses not to report offenses is a certain proximity to the food business operators. Depending on how well they are backed by their district offices and integrated in the structures, the veterinarians working on the plants inevitably develop proximity to the FBO. Additionally, district veterinary offices at times do not prosecute violations the amtl. TA report on, which does not encourage reporting offenses. At times, the exertion of influence against penalising animal welfare offenses originates from a higher political level within the competent authorities so that hands are tied for all veterinarians involved.

How can the animal welfare situation in slaughterhouses be improved?

In order to improve animal welfare standards in slaughterhouses a package of measures must be implemented. The FBOs must primarily take more responsibility for animal welfare in the

slaughterhouses according to the regulation (EG) Nr. 1099/2009. AWOs and the staff require a high level of knowledge and competence for their occupation. The FBO must ensure this by regular training and suitable staff in the areas dealing with livestock. The official veterinarians, the FBOs and the AWOs need to communicate about animal welfare issues on a regular base. All official veterinarians dealing with animal welfare in the context of slaughterhouses must be well trained to identify and prevent and if necessary penalise the offenses in the field. Data collected on relevant findings for animals arriving at the slaughterhouse and the relevant findings acquired during post mortem inspections thus must be put at the centre of evaluation in terms of animal welfare indicators. After all, the situation in the stocks of origin and the handling of the animals during transportation are relevant for risk assessments in slaughterhouses.

The number of official veterinarians needs to be matched in a risk-oriented way to the specific demands for animal welfare on the plant. A higher percentage of offenses e.g. should lead to an increase. In order to assess the risk, the veterinarians on the plants and in the district offices need to communicate about animal welfare issues in context with slaughterhouses on a regular base. They also need to be technically equipped in such a way that they can monitor and evaluate animal welfare adequately.

The wage agreements and the contracts need to be adapted to the European body of rules in order to provide more clarity and transparency for animal welfare concerning their responsibilities. They require reliable support by their district offices and reporting offenses to their authorities must no longer be stigmatised.

In general, training for official veterinarians working in slaughterhouses needs to be re-assessed in terms of legal requirements and demands. And finally, the mandatory installation of closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras would have a strong impact on the standard of animal welfare in slaughterhouses and such support official veterinarians. In Great Britain the mandatory installation of CCTV cameras has improved the standard of animal welfare during slaughter significantly. It therefore can be seen as a chance both for the FBOs and the authorities to significantly improve the standard of animal welfare in slaughterhouses. Mandatory CCTV could prevent bad press and such improve the reputation of slaughterhouses and the official veterinarians.

The **single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place** (Bernard Shaw).