

### ANIMAL WELFARE

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#### Ethical implications of the alternatives to surgical piglet castration

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##### The changing human-animal-relationship

The human-animal-relationship has drastically changed in the last two decades: Animals are not any longer regarded as just objects that the owner can treat how he or she wants to, but as they are more and more seen as subjects, i.e. as sentient creatures, who deserve that people that own or care for animals have to guarantee their animals a decent life. A good description of a decent life of animals in human care is the concept of the “Five Freedoms” that describe the current European understanding of good animal welfare:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst, by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
- Freedom from discomfort, by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
- Freedom from pain, injury, and disease, by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
- Freedom to express normal behaviour, by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal’s own kind.
- Freedom from fear and distress, by ensuring conditions and treatment that avoid mental suffering.

Of course, keeping and using animals for human purposes is mostly connected with imposing on the animals some sort of stress, curtailing normal behaviour and even pain and suffering. However, in the light of the growing understanding of the responsibility that humans have for the animals in their custody and/or use, there is the moral imperative that **only the mildest possible treatment** is allowed and that there must be **a strong justification for causing any pain or stress** to animals.

##### The responsibility of humans for the animals in their custody

In the light of this modern understanding, it is necessary to scrutinize many of the traditional treatments of animals that may be obsolete, since they can be replaced by better (more animal-friendly) methods to reach the same goal. One of these traditional treatments is piglet castration, especially the castration without anaesthesia and

pain relief.

Castration of both male and female pigs has a long history: for centuries it was done first to prevent the commingling of pastured domestic pigs with wild boars, then for preventing the “boar taint” of pork produced from adult male pigs. Until today, most piglets in Europe are still castrated by the farmers without anaesthesia/analgesia, which until recently was not questioned, since the “strong justification” was to make sure that the killing (slaughtering) of the animals for food production is only given, if the meat of the slaughtered animals is afterwards indeed used for human consumption, which would not be true if the meat “stinks” and the meat would be discarded. So: the only justification for the castration of male piglets is preventing the “boar taint” of the meat from male pigs.

However, modern views on how to treat animals diminish more and more the acceptance of inflicting pain to animals, when this can be avoided. Thus, the questioning, why piglets are castrated without anaesthesia and pain relief started around the year 2000. In the following years, the following three alternatives to the painful traditional castration were discussed and Europe-wide legally approved: 1. surgical castration with anaesthesia/analgesia; 2. raising entire males, and 3. Immunization against GnRH

##### What has been done and what not

However, there was and still is a lengthy debate about which of the alternatives should be applied - up to now only arguments from the farmers’ community, the meat industry and the retailers about why this or this alternative cannot be accepted are exchanged. The 2010 European Declaration initiated by the EU Commission on the voluntary end of the painful castration throughout Europe by 2012 did not have a measurable effect. And even the German legal deadline of ending castration without anaesthesia, which was set by the German Welfare Act for the 31.12.2018, has been postponed by the German government.

The general argumentation is that all three alternatives have comparably equal pro’s and con’s and the various players in the food production chain cannot agree on which one alternative since they would be differently affected by the alternatives. The judgement that all three alternatives have the same amount of pro’s and con’s, is, however, from an ethical point of view simply wrong. Why: since there are different kinds of con’s, namely on the one hand economic disadvantages for humans, e.g. additional costs and labour and/or for difficulties to market the meat of entire boars or difficulties

to explain the consumer the vaccination at the point of sale; and on the other hand there are disadvantages for the animals due to e.g. loss of body parts by the amputation or increased stress and anxiety due to the fixation of the animals or due to increased ranking order fights. At this point of the considerations it is important to be reminiscent of the fact that the discussions to change the traditional castration method never were started for economic reasons, but solely for reasons that are in the interest of the animals. Thus, we have to rank the pro's and con's of the alternatives by strictly looking at the level of stress and anxiety that each method imposes on the animals. If we do this, then we have a clear ranking order from the method that charge the animals the "highest price" to the method that charges the animals the "lowest price" (see Tab. 1).

Of course, there is in case of the immunocastration, the method that imposes the lowest pain and stress level on the animals, a "price" to be paid by the farmers and the meat industry and to a certain extend by the retailers: the farmer has to buy the vaccine and to vaccinate the animals twice (the second time when the male pigs are already quite heavy), the meat industry must develop a method to recognize those animals that may not be vaccinated correctly, and the retailers have to properly explain the animal welfare advancement to the consumer to make sure that the vaccination is not confused with any hormone treatment.

**Ethical assessment**

There are interests of humans "against" interests of animals - and: ethics requires balancing conflicting values and interests. In the case of the alternatives to piglet castration, the moral judgement is quite easy: humans can handle the economic disadvantages of the alternatives that are "better" for the animals, animals can NOT handle the disadvantages that are imposed on them. Thus: it is a **moral obligation** of all stakeholders in the pork chain to **agree on the vaccination** against the boar taint, and to compensate the additional costs for the farmers, and to generate the acceptance of this **animal friendliest method** to prevent the boar taint.

Table 1: A synopsis of the Pro's and Con's of the 3 in Europe approved alternatives (disadvantages for the animals are printed in red, those for the humans are printed in green)

Method	Pro's	Con's
Surgical castration with anaesthesia/analgesia	Pain relief during and after surgery	Restraining pigs = stress Local anaesthesia is painful Castration = amputation
Raising entire males	No manipulating the animals No pain due to surgery No amputation	Injuries due to fighting males Soft fat Potential boar taint
Immunization against GnRH	Only two injections No pain due to surgery No amputation	Structural changes Additional work during finishing the pigs