



**VETERINARY IRELAND
POLICY DOCUMENT
ON
NECESSARY PAINFUL
PROCEDURES
IN CATTLE AND SHEEP
2019**

**AS RATIFIED BY
VETERINARY IRELAND NATIONAL COUNCIL
21st NOVEMBER 2019**



Veterinary Ireland Policy on Necessary Painful Procedures in Cattle and Sheep 2019

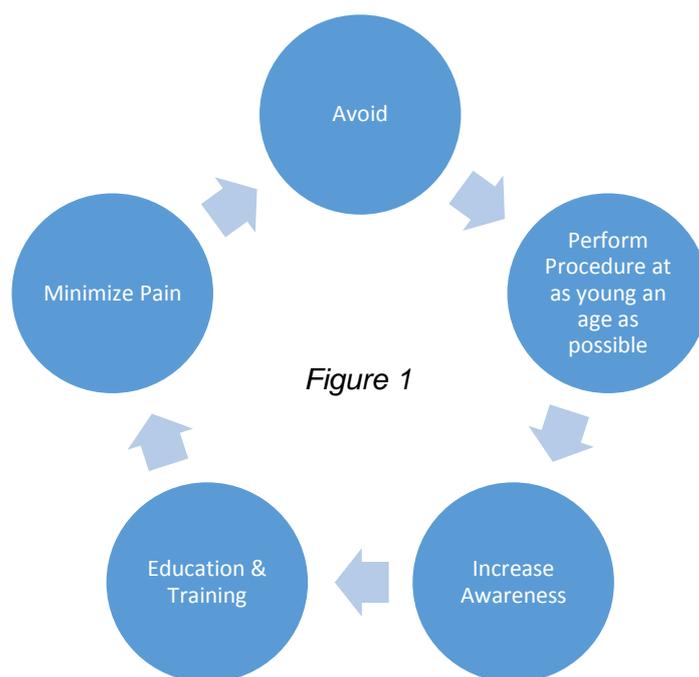


Figure 1

Necessary Painful Procedures

The painful procedures referred to in this document are:

- Castration of cattle and sheep i.e. the surgical removal of, or the occlusion of the blood supply to, the testicles of the animal
- Disbudding or dehorning of cattle i.e. the removal of, or the occlusion of the blood supply to, the horn bud (which develops in the skin on the head of a horned calf soon after birth); or the removal of the horn (which develops as the horn bud grows and becomes attached to the underlying bone tissue at approximately 2 months of age)
- Tail docking of cattle and sheep i.e. the surgical removal of, or the occlusion of the blood supply to, the tail of the animal. Tail docking of cattle has been prohibited by law in Ireland since 2003.⁽¹⁾

These procedures are carried out other than for therapeutic or diagnostic purposes and involve interference with, or the removal of, the sensitive tissue or bone structure of the animal. They are commonly carried out on many of the cattle and sheep in Ireland to reduce the risk of harm to either farmers, the public, other animals or the animal itself.



Castrated bulls (known as steers or bullocks) are less aggressive, safer and easier to handle and tend to produce more tender meat than entire bulls. Castration prevents indiscriminate breeding, thus reducing the risk of breeding inferior stock. The advantages of castration of ram lambs are similar to those for cattle. Castration also reduces the risk of meat taint, a disagreeable taste from the meat from rams.

Disbudding and dehorning are necessary to prevent cattle injuring human handlers and each other, particularly during transport, in marts, slaughterhouses or at housing.

Tail-docking of sheep is performed to prevent or reduce the accumulation of faeces on the tail and the fleece of sheep. Sheep with dirty fleeces and tails are more likely to suffer from flystrike, a condition where flies lay their eggs on the dirty hair of the sheep and those eggs hatch to produce maggots which then burrow into the skin and underlying flesh of the sheep. Flystrike causes severe pain and suffering to the animal. It often results in the death of the sheep.

These painful procedures have been performed on Irish cattle and sheep for many decades, often without the use of any anaesthetic or analgesic.

Current Irish legislation, which came into force in 2014⁽²⁾ requires that all cattle and sheep undergoing painful procedures must have appropriate anaesthesia and analgesia with the exception of:

- Calves disbudded under 15 days of age
- Calves castrated by Burdizzo under 6 months of age and rams castrated by Burdizzo under 3 months of age (The Burdizzo is an instrument that crushes the nerves and vessels in the spermatic cord supplying the testicle, causing occlusion of the blood supply and degeneration of the testicle)
- Lambs that are tail docked under 8 days of age, by using a rubber ring
- Calves and lambs that are castrated under 8 days of age, by using a rubber ring

Custom and practice and traditional management systems in Ireland pre-exist these rules and some painful procedures continue to be performed outside of the scope of these Regulations.

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Animal Health and Welfare (SACAHW) of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) carried out an assessment of painful procedures traditionally performed on farm animals. The SACAHW delivered its opinion to the DAFM on castration of cattle and sheep, disbudding and dehorning of cattle and tail-docking of sheep on 1st June 2015⁽³⁾. Their recommendations for changes to the current legislation stated:

- Recognising the need to provide for necessary husbandry practices, and taking into account practices in other jurisdictions, it is recommended that the upper age limit for castration of a bull using a Burdizzo without the use of local anaesthetic be reduced from the current position of 6 months to as close as possible to 2 months.
- The use of analgesia (i.e. Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs [NSAIDs]) at the time of castration of cattle and sheep, disbudding or dehorning of cattle and sheep, and the tail-docking of sheep is recommended for all ages.



The SACAHW also made a number of other recommendations, in particular:

- Implementation of a communication and education campaign informing farmers of the benefits and justification for earlier castration of calves;
- Breeding of polled cattle (cattle born without horns) should be included as part of holistic breeding programs taking into account other economically important traits;
- Research should be carried out on the prevalence of flystrike in Ireland and the relationship between tail-docking and the risk of flystrike.

Veterinary Ireland's **Policy on the Performance of Painful Procedures on Animals**, adopted in 2016, calls for the use of appropriate anaesthesia and analgesia in all cases involving painful procedures on animals so as to prevent any pain during, and to minimize any pain after the procedure ⁽⁴⁾.

Veterinary Ireland's Animal Welfare Committee, having reviewed the scientific literature, recommends expansion of that policy to the five pillared approach outlined in *Figure 1*.

1. Avoid

These procedures should be avoided, where possible. Veterinary Ireland recommends that farmers review their traditional practices in consultation with their veterinary practitioner to explore alternative strategies which will avoid or reduce the need for these procedures. For example, the use of polled breeds (breeds carrying the gene which prevents horn growth) offers an alternative to the necessity of disbudding/dehorning.

2. Perform procedure at as young an age as possible

Scientific research indicates that all of these procedures, with the possible exception of tail-docking and castration of lambs⁽³⁾, are much less painful when performed soon after birth, compared with performing these procedures on animals two months of age or older.

3. Increase Awareness

It was a commonly held belief in Ireland and in other countries that delaying castration of cattle until after weaning conferred a growth advantage to bulls over bulls castrated at a younger age. Recent studies have proven that delaying castration of bulls does not result in any increase in carcase weight or yield over carcasses from cattle castrated at an early age⁽⁵⁾. Scientific studies have also shown that there is no difference in growth rate between castrated and uncastrated bull calves prior to the onset of puberty⁽⁵⁾. Delaying castration offers no economic benefit to the farmer, but results in much greater pain and risk to the health and welfare of the animal.

Disbudding of calves is a much simpler and safer procedure, and a much less painful procedure for the animals than dehorning.

Tail-docking of cattle is still carried out on Irish dairy farms, to reduce the risk of udder contamination from a dirty tail. There is a low level of awareness that tail-docking of cattle has been prohibited by law in Ireland since 2003.

The primary concern of the Irish veterinary profession is for the welfare of animals⁽⁶⁾. Veterinary Ireland commits to reminding all stakeholders of their responsibilities to the animals under their care and to provide any and all advice and assistance to the said stakeholders.



4. Education & Training

There is always scope to improve what we are doing. Veterinary Ireland recommends the insertion of compulsory animal welfare training modules in all levels of agri-industry education. This training should be veterinary led, verifiable and certified. The objective of this should be that only adequately trained farmers hold a license to perform painful procedures on their livestock.

Where painful procedures are allowed to be carried out by farmers without the use of anaesthesia or analgesia, they must be carried out using proper equipment and following appropriate training to ensure adequate technical skills, experience and competence. Professional veterinary assistance must be sought for all other procedures.

5. Minimize Pain

Veterinary Ireland recommends that appropriate anaesthesia and analgesia is provided in all cases involving painful procedures in animals, so as to prevent any pain during, and to minimise any pain after the procedure.

References

(As per numbers given in text)

1. The Protection of Animals Kept For Farming Purposes Act 1984 (Bovine Animals) (Prohibition on Tail Docking) Regulations 2003, which has been superceded by the Prohibition on Tail-Docking (Bovines)(No. 2) Regulations 2014 {S.I. No. 225 of 2014}
2. (i) Animal Health and Welfare Act, 2013
(ii) SI 107 of 2014 (Animal Health and Welfare (Section 17) Regulations 2014)
(iii) SI 127 of 2014 (Animal Health and Welfare (Operations and Procedures) (No. 2) Regulations 2014)
3. 'Opinion of the Scientific Committee, taking account of current practice in other jurisdictions and recognising the need to provide for necessary husbandry practices, on the scientific appropriateness of the time limits set out in the Animal Health and Welfare (Operations and Procedures) (No. 2) Regulations 2014 on i) castration of cattle and sheep, ii) dehorning/disbudding of cattle, and iii) tail docking of sheep.' Scientific Advisory Committee on Animal Health and Welfare of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Ireland 1 June 2015.
4. 'Policy Document on Performance of Painful Procedures on Animals 2016' Veterinary Ireland, 24 November 2016.
5. American Veterinary Medical Association Literature Review on the Welfare Implications of Castration of Cattle (15 July 2014).
6. Veterinary Council of Ireland's Code of Professional Conduct (Veterinary Practitioners) Issue: 13, Date of Issue 16/07/19



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