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W. Christopher Scruton

Stephen Claas

Layout

David Brown

Logo Design

Ruth Cronje, and Jan Swanson;

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Cover Design

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Lessons for pig farmers from the British pork chain

M. R. Muirhead, BVMS, DPM, FRCVS

Garth Veterinary Group, Beeford, Driffield, East Yorkshire, England

Introduction

The last three years have seen a dramatic decline in the British pig industry associated with the following:

- Overproduction in the EU
- The decline in Far East markets
- New legislation
- New animal welfare requirements
- The unequal interpretation of European Directives
- The imposition of BSE controls
- The value of sterling
- The duplicity of the major retailing groups

This paper looks at some of the lessons that can be learned from these events in order that the more extreme regulations and problems can be avoided.

History and politics

To understand the changes that have taken place, it is important to be aware of the serious food problems that have arisen over the past 30 years in Europe. In the early 1970s, Stilboestrol implants were used as growth promoters in veal calves and poultry. Some of these implants were deposited in the neck and processed into baby foods in Italy with very serious side effects. Consumer reactions were immense. Consumer pressure resulted in the banning of hormones and implants in cattle, pigs, and sheep across the EU. In the early 1980s, the problem of salmonella infection in eggs was exploded to the surface by inept political comment, the results of which almost destroyed the British poultry industry. In 1985, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) appeared with disastrous consequences for the cattle industry and the long term effects of this are yet to be determined. The recent outbreaks of food poisoning associated with *E. coli* in Scotland have added further concerns to the general public. The problems of antibiotic resistance have caused the EU to ban most antibiotic growth promoters and a total ban is expected.

There is a call in the UK and some parts of Europe to ban genetically modified food ingredients. Finally, the recent dioxin poisoning in Belgium has highlighted the need for clear traceability from the animal feeds to the animal to the table.

The results of these events have, and quite rightly so, had an enormous impact upon consumers. They neither trust nor believe the words of the scientist, the farmer, or the control systems expert. As a consequence, enormous pressures have been applied to both the politicians and the food supply chain, resulting in the EU Food Safety Directive and its adoption in the UK with the establishment of The Food Standards Agency, an independent body. The first responsibility of this agency is to the consumer.

It is within this context, therefore, that the changes to the UK pig industry have taken place. A second and equally important factor, however, has been adverse media comments concerning food safety issues and the impact of the various animal welfare groups on the systems under which animals are kept. The banning of crates for use with veal calves destroyed the UK veal industry in the early 1990s only to replace it by importing veal from animals reared in such systems. It is estimated that up to 70% of all letters sent to politicians are in one way or another associated with aspects of animal welfare.

Legislation

In order to appreciate the background leading up to the current situation in the UK it is necessary to give a brief review of the legislative processes. In 1965 the Brambell Committee was required by Government to review animal welfare. The Committee's deliberations were given effect in Part 1 of the Agricultural (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act in 1968. In essence this made it an offence to cause livestock unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress, to make mandatory regulations on welfare matters, and to issue codes of practice for the welfare of all classes of livestock. Ministers were given wide-ranging powers over the control of feeding, mutilations, and other areas. Other legislation relates to welfare during transport and to cruelty.

The welfare codes

Under the 1968 Act, Codes of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pigs (and all other farmed species) were produced. These define the major standards necessary in pig production and include the provision of the following:

- Comfort and shelter
- Readily accessible fresh water and a diet to maintain the animals in full health and vigor
- Freedom of movement
- The company of other animals, particularly of like kind
- The opportunity to exercise most normal patterns of behavior
- Light during the hours of daylight and lighting readily available to enable animals to be inspected at any time
- Flooring that neither harms the animals nor causes undue strain
- The prevention of rapid diagnosis and treatment of vice, injury, parasitic infestation, and disease
- The avoidance of unnecessary mutilation
- Emergency arrangements to cover fire, the breakdown of essential mechanical services, and the disruption of supplies

The codes give detailed advice on housing, fire and other emergencies, ventilation and temperature requirements, lighting, mechanical equipment and services, feed and water, management aspects both in farrowing, suckling, and growing pigs and the management of dry sows, gilts and boars, with additions for outdoor pigs.

Under the Welfare of Livestock Regulations of 1994, a private members bill was adopted and passed through parliament that prohibited the use of confinement stalls and tethers. The regulations also required that the pig must be free to turn around without difficulty at all times, except during lactation, for up to 28 days, and that the area of the pen must be not less than the square of the length of the pig. Furthermore, none of the pen sides can be less than 75% of the pig in length. These Regulations were enacted to come into effect on 1 January 1999. In effect, this meant the banning of stalls and tethers and any form of confinement of the dry sow. The 1994 regulations imposed further constraints on the pig industry, including the banning of tail docking or teeth clipping, unless advised on veterinary grounds. The weaning of piglets at less than three weeks was also banned, unless there were welfare problems in the health of the dam or the piglets themselves. This, of course, precludes the possibility of segregated early weaning and three-site production. Fi-

nally, these regulations laid down the floor area per weaner per pen at different weights as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Floor area per weaner per pen at different weights as prescribed by the Welfare of Livestock Regulations (1994)

Live weight		Area	
lb	kg	ft ²	m ²
44	(20)	1.6	(0.15)
88	(40)	2.7	(0.25)
132	(60)	3.8	(0.35)
176	(80)	4.8	(0.45)
220	(100)	5.5	(0.5)

The codes have provided the industry with good standards and advice on housing and management of pigs, both indoors and outdoors. They are simple to use, some would say basic in their requirements, but, never-the-less, they have set excellent standards for the industry at large. Each farm must have a copy of these codes present for inspection and signed as having been read by everyone working on the farm.

The stall and tether ban

This was enacted on 1 January 1999, whereby it became an offence to house any animals in confinement. Stalls and tethers are also banned in Sweden and changes are taking place to comply with UK regulations in both Denmark and Holland; Germany already has control over the use of stalls and tethers. However, in the remainder of the EU, stalls are still legal and new units continue to be established with confinement housing. The UK industry is therefore at a significant disadvantage with the cost of the changes and additional running costs. The government gave no financial assistance towards these changes. It is illegal for pork to be produced in the UK under conditions of confinement and yet confinement-produced pork is imported from other countries across the world for sale at our retail outlets. The consumer and animal welfare advocate, with supermarket promotion, persuaded the politicians to ban confinement. The retailers then—in my view with complete cynicism—have since ignored the consumer message they so strongly promoted and now buy their pork from any cheaper source regardless of the welfare standards used in production. While one can understand the global economy, never-the-less, once the created niche market of any product has been saturated, the supermarkets and retailers look the other way. This process will be repeated with the present day momentum to provide organic pork. The law of supply and economic demand is the overriding factor.

Welfare schemes

Salmonellosis in eggs highlighted the problem of food poisoning to the consumer. As a consequence, the government set up the “Ministry Pig Health Scheme” in the mid 1980s. This was a basic veterinary monitoring scheme to review and document welfare, the use of medicines, the monitoring of in-feed medications, and the monitoring of feeds for salmonella contamination. Consumer and supermarket pressure, however, demanded more sophisticated auditing schemes. In addition to the Ministry Pig Health Scheme, the pig industry was then presented with a variety of schemes from 1996 onwards including Farm Assured British Pigs (FAB), the Malton Codes, British Assured Quality Pigs, Freedom Foods by the RSPCA, The Scottish Pig Industry initiative, and various supermarket schemes. This plethora of regulations, with their massive bureaucracy, paperwork, and required rules and regulations, almost completely overwhelmed the pig farmer and the supervising veterinary surgeon. For example, the FAB operating manual consisted of 98 pages, 233 regulations, 68 transport standards, 8 appendices, and 11 protocols. The Malton Code contained 215 regulations. There then developed the ludicrous situation where some supermarket chains would add their own further requirements in an attempt to create their own niche markets. These two schemes, which probably accounted for 80% of on-farm monitoring have, at last, been amalgamated by the less onerous Assured British Meats (ABM) and, under this umbrella, Assured British Pigs (ABP). The price of British pork became uncompetitive due to the various economic constraints. It was cheaper to import from Poland or other European sources, and the presentation of such quality assurance to the consumer was quietly dropped.

Today auditing schemes require the development of a health plan for each farm that includes written procedures for the following:

- Disease control
- Vehicle entry
- Biosecurity
- Pest control
- Health and safety
- Cleansing and disinfection
- Fallen stock
- Broken needles
- Disposal of sharps
- Training policies
- Medicine controls

These have raised standards on all farms and are to be welcomed.

The role of veterinarians

Their role in the schemes consists of visits to the farm every three months when a full farm inspection is carried out to certify that the farm is complying with the rules and regulations. Veterinarians are also responsible for the health plans and standard operating procedures. There are tight controls over the use of medicines to the extent that each bottle of antibiotic dispensed onto the farm must now be documented, leaving the dispensary by batch number. It must be recorded on the farm and each milliliter of drug used has likewise to be documented as from that particular bottle. These regulations have resulted from the dioxin poisoning in Belgium. One can fully appreciate the rationality of it all. However, it is yet another enormous burden on an already over-regulated industry. Veterinarians are responsible for setting up education programs on the farm, an overview of welfare, and—in particular—laying down the procedures on the farm for disease control. All this is very necessary, but it is ironical that up to 60% of the time on the farm is now spent filling in the paperwork and the documentation and, in many cases, less than 40% looking at the pigs.

To carry out an inspection, the veterinarian must attend courses and become a member of the Pig Veterinary Society.

However, from a veterinary point of view, the assurance schemes have provided independent auditing, improved welfare standards, and created regular visits to the farm. The latter have provided closer working relationships between veterinarians and farmers and have yielded positive economic benefits for both as well. Furthermore, better control of the use of medicines has been achieved, and the schemes have been given a high profile professional image. However, there has been no financial benefit from the sale of such pork, and the costs of implementing the schemes have not been recovered. Additional problems have arisen because different schemes have different standards, and sometimes the standards are difficult to interpret. The veterinarian is also sometimes viewed as “the police” and the standards adopted are, in some cases, controversial.

The advantages and disadvantages of the schemes

Advantages

Without any doubt, the objectives of the welfare and auditing schemes are to be commended. As pig industries have progressed from less intensive systems to more intensive ones, the welfare of the animals, and in particular

the individual, had in some cases been sadly neglected. The UK pig industry today probably has the best control of animal welfare in the world. The schemes have created a discipline and defined clear standards that have to be achieved. Standards of education on the farm are to be welcomed, not only from a welfare aspect but also from efficiency of production and disease control aspects. These are also providing a better career structure for people in the industry. The quarterly veterinary visits, which are necessary within the rules of the schemes, have provided the farm with a constant source of expertise and, in particular, opportunities to review all aspects of the business. The control of medicines as a result of the procedures is to be welcomed. Quarterly reviews have dramatically dropped the use of antibiotics, both in feed and at a group level. This is reassuring from a consumer point of view, and it is touted as one of the highlights of the control systems. Perhaps the greatest advantage is the consumer confidence that has been created by the open knowledge of the auditing procedures and documentation. This was initially promoted by the retailers, but when alternative, cheaper pork could be found, marketing and labeling quietly changed to “manufactured in the UK” or “British manufactured.” Even today, after 18 months of pressure by the industry, British produced pork is still not labeled adequately. EU rules consider such to be unfair competition, but their interpretation differs from country to country.

Disadvantages

Sadly, from an economic point of view, the UK pig farmer has not seen any form of added value to product. The industry has been “conned.” An enormous amount of money has been invested moving animals out of stalls and tethers, with much time, effort, and paperwork required to satisfy the regulations. The competition between the schemes has meant that each has been trying to outdo the other. The UK industry has been enormously disadvantaged with the government’s unrealistic interpretations and impositions of EU rules and regulations. These are often viewed differently in the rest of the European union to their advantage. Where there are disputes in interpretation, it can often take 5-10 years to seek clarification by the European Courts, during which time industries in the UK have become bankrupt.

The schemes have been promoted extensively by the procurers of meat, the politicians, and the retailers, yet up to 40% of pork in the UK is being sourced from non-compliant systems. In a global economy, the bottom line is all embracing.

Lessons to be learned

One representative organization

The British pig industry over the years has been a disparate group of at least 15 self-interested centers. It is only now, after some 30 years of deliberations, that at long last there is one political umbrella—The National Pig Association. The first hard lesson has been that the industry must speak with one single voice. The National Pork Producer Council is a tremendous asset to the USA industry in this regard.

Consumer and political pressures

Be aware of political pressures and anticipate where the challenges are going to occur and be prepared to respond. Welfare must be of paramount importance, and if an industry has not got its house in order, then it must very quickly learn to do so

Control the marketing of pork

Promotion of the UK meat industry has previously been handled by one body, The Meat and Livestock Commission, speaking on behalf of all meats. The UK pig industry has been the poorer partner in this. Control of one’s own destiny, and in particular the financial aspects of promotion and marketing, has been a vital lesson for the UK industry to learn. As a result of BSE, the costs of incineration of specified offals from the pig have had to be financed by the industry. Furthermore, the banning of feeding meat and bone meal to any form of livestock has imposed a further economic constraint. It is important in this context to note that the practice of feeding plasma proteins in the USA would be banned in the UK and ultimately in Europe.

The media

The media has a major impact on consumer perceptions of intensive livestock production. Education and promotion to the general public is an absolutely vital component of a successful industry. The television picture of a sow farrowing with the afterbirth, a stillborn pig, and a mummified pig lying behind is a very powerful tool when it is described as “sows lying in their own filth with pigs rotting behind.” The problem is that without a large political voice, there is often no means of reply. Be prepared to respond; be proactive.

Auditing schemes

Control schemes have given the veterinarian a much more important role to play in livestock production, and this is to be welcomed with the very positive contributions that can be given to the systems. However, it is essential to develop only one national scheme with one agreed standard. The industry must play a pivotal role in such developments.

On farm practices

The pig industry must be prepared to respond to and anticipate any potential problems; for example, there are welfare pressures in Europe considering the banning of farrowing crates. In anticipation of this, an independent, extensive study has already been carried out looking at the variety of alternatives to see whether this is a viable proposition. So far, no system, other than pigs out-of-doors, has been shown to provide better welfare.

The environment

The problems of slurry, manure, and water disposal, particularly in respect to ammonia emissions and pollution of the environment, are now hot topics within the EU. Procedures limiting the spread of the slurry to within so many meters of drainage channels, the covering of lagoons with plastic sheeting, and limits to the amount of nitrogen from waste that can be spread per hectare on the land are a few of the up-and-coming constraints.

Regulations

Keep rules and regulations simple, understandable, and achievable, otherwise they just end up in a drawer in the office.

Animal welfare

Develop control systems that satisfy the aspects of welfare, production, and disease management with the minimum of bureaucracy and a maximum of effectiveness.

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