

Calves should receive more pain relief during husbandry procedures, researchers find

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Calves may not be receiving the right level of pain relief when undergoing routine animal husbandry procedures including castration and disbudding, new research has found.

The study from the University of Nottingham School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, published in the *Vet Record*, found that despite being recognised as being as painful as other procedures, calf husbandry procedures were significantly less likely to include the use of analgesics such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) in addition to the local anaesthetic that is routinely used.

The results support calls from the British Veterinary Association and British Cattle Veterinary Association for vets and producers to routinely introduce the use of NSAIDs in addition to local anaesthesia when conducting these routine procedures.

The inclusion of an NSAID, in addition to local anaesthetic, when disbudding or castrating calves has been shown to further control the [pain](#), particularly post-operative pain as the local anaesthetic wears off. Their use is considered best practice, although legislation in this area is often out dated, slow to change and may lag behind scientific understanding, public opinion and available drugs.

Positive message

John Remnant, Clinical Assistant Professor in Farm Animal Health and Production, at the Nottingham Vet School, said: "Overall, the message of this paper is a positive one – it appears that veterinarians' awareness of pain in cattle and willingness to use analgesics in general has increased over the last decade.

"However, whilst this should be commended, the apparent lack of use of appropriate analgesia specifically in calves undergoing routine husbandry procedures such as castration and disbudding requires urgent action."

Reducing pain caused by disease or veterinary procedures is an important aspect of maintaining farm animal welfare and historic studies have suggested that the use of analgesics in cattle has lagged behind their use in companion [animals](#), although this study suggests that things are improving.

Since a similar survey was run back in 2006, there has been an increase in the number of analgesics available, along with substantial efforts to promote their use and the latest study aimed to assess whether perceptions of pain in cattle by cattle practitioners have changed during the last decade. It appears that these changes have driven change in both pain perception and the use of analgesics.

The research, which was a student project, surveyed more than 240

cattle practitioners about their perceptions of pain in cattle, their use of NSAIDs for a range of 27 different conditions and procedures, and their opinions on acceptable costs for analgesia.

It revealed that almost all (99 per cent) agreed that cattle benefit from receiving analgesic drugs as part of their treatment and most (96 per cent) believed that cattle recover faster if given analgesic drugs.

It also found that female practitioners and those who graduated after 2010 were more likely to perceive conditions and procedures as painful, while male practitioners and those who graduated before 1990 were more likely to give significantly lower pain scores.

The results showed that generally the more painful the condition or procedure, the more likely it was that the practitioner would use NSAIDs – however, this pattern was not found in disbudding and castration in calves, and dystocia and dehorning in adult cattle which, despite being recognised with a high pain score, were associated with lower use of the painkillers.

Acceptable costs

In the past, the cost of providing NSAIDs has been perceived as a barrier. This study asked participants to suggest what they thought was an acceptable cost for analgesia for a variety of procedures. Although costs allocated to procedures such as disbudding and castration were lower compared to more major procedures, the small size of calves means that the cost of providing this additional analgesia is low. The estimated cost of providing NSAIDs at disbudding was within the acceptable range given for more than 90 per cent of the practitioners.

The British Cattle Veterinary Association and British Veterinary Association have been calling for the routine introduction of NSAIDs in

addition to [local anaesthesia](#) when conducting husbandry procedures.

British Veterinary Association President Gudrun Ravetz said: "Pain recognition, management and treatment of calves during routine husbandry procedures was identified by BVA and British Cattle Veterinary Association as a priority animal welfare problem following the launch of BVA's Animal welfare strategy last year, and we have been working together closely to progress this issue since.

"So, we welcome these important and timely findings that provide an insight into a critical area of [cattle](#) practice and farm animal welfare. We'd strongly urge government, vets, farming bodies and other stakeholders to support the implementation of this study's recommendations to ensure the highest welfare of the animals we farm."

More information: John G Remnant et al. Clinician attitudes to pain and use of analgesia in cattle: where are we 10 years on?, *Veterinary Record* (2017). [DOI: 10.1136/vr.104428](https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.104428)

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