Killing day-old chicks? Public opinion regarding potential alternatives

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Abstract

Throughout the world, male chicks from layer breeds are killed just after hatching, as they are not profitable as regards the production of meat. The Dutch and European parliaments have insisted on research into possible alternatives to the killing of day-old chicks. In the present study we have investigated Dutch public opinion on the acceptability of these alternatives by means of discussions in so-called focus groups and via a public survey through computer-aided personal interviews (CAPI). To inform the participants about the subject, a film was made to explain the current practice and introduce a number of technological alternatives that would prevent development of male embryos, as well as the possibility of creating a ‘dual-purpose chicken’ that would allow male chicks to be used for meat production. The topics addressed in the study included the willingness of participants to pay a premium for eggs and chick meat, were it necessary to prevent killing of male chicks. Focus-group discussions showed that many participants were unaware of the current practise of killing male chicks, and were shocked by this practice. However, once informed, the participants seemed able to take various considerations into account and rank the alternatives. The alternatives ‘looking into the fresh egg (to determine sex of the egg and not incubate male eggs)’, and ‘dual-purpose chickens’ scored best out of all the possible alternatives, and higher than maintaining the current practice. ‘Influencing the laying hens such that they produce fewer male eggs’ scored the same as maintaining the current practice. The use of “genetic modification to facilitate looking into the fresh egg’ scored only slightly lower than maintaining the current practice. Alternatives whereby developing male embryos die, or are killed, scored lower than maintaining the current practice.

Keywords: animal ethics, animal welfare, chicks, killing, laying hens, public opinion

Introduction

The commercial poultry industry is highly specialised throughout the world. There are breeds specialised in laying eggs, others in producing meat. Since males of laying breeds do not produce eggs and are not profitable, as regards meat production, they are killed immediately after hatching. This happens throughout the world and is carried out in conventional as well as organic poultry farming. The use of specialised breeds, which led to the practice of killing male chicks, has already been practised for approximately 50 years. In the EU, nearly 280 million laying hen chicks hatch annually for the production of new laying hens. Consequently, approximately 280 million male, day-old chicks are killed annually in the EU. Killing of newly hatched chicks is generally not considered an animal welfare problem, provided the killing is carried out in such a way, that it does not cause (unnecessary) anxiety or pain. According to EU regulations, two methods are permissible for the killing of groups of chickens and both are considered acceptable in terms of welfare. These methods are asphyxiation by an inert gas, such as CO₂ or argon, and shredding (mechanical destruction that ensures immediate death) (EU Council Directive 93/119/EC). In the Netherlands, asphyxiation is preferred, as the day-old chicks killed in this manner can be (and are) marketed as whole chicks as feed for pets and zoo animals. In the UK, shredding is preferred as it causes instant death. Shredded chicks can only be used in compound feeds for pet animals. There is more demand for whole chicks than for the shredded ones.

The mass killing of day-old chicks raises ethical discussions (see Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals 2008, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality 2007 and 2008). Many people view the killing of these young animals as an example of instrumentalisation of animals in current production systems (Aerts et al 2009).

Due to the aversion to killing day-old male chicks, experiments have been performed in a number of countries to rear layer-type males to a live weight of approximately 600 g and market them as an alternative for quail, or to a live weight of approximately 2,000 g and market them as an alternative to broiler chickens (Schaublin et al 2005; Koenig et al 2009). The conclusion from those experiments was that the layer-