Human-animal relationships at sheep and cattle abattoirs

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Abstract

There are accumulating international data in a number of livestock industries that show that a negative attitude by stockpeople towards interacting with pigs, dairy cattle and poultry is correlated with increased levels of fear and stress in farm animals and in turn reduced animal productivity. While most of this research has been on-farm, one study has shown similar attitude-behaviour correlations in a pig abattoir. The major aim of this research was to examine the stockperson attitude-behaviour at sheep and cattle abattoirs. Twenty-two Australian abattoirs participated in the collection of stockperson attitudes and behaviour (81 stockpeople — 35 cattle stockpeople and 46 sheep stockpeople; six abattoirs slaughtering cattle, six slaughtering sheep and ten slaughtering both cattle and sheep). Several significant correlations between stockperson attitudes and behaviour were detected. In particular, the perceived pressures imposed by perceived lack of control over their actions, perceived time constraints, perceived effect of poor facilities and inappropriate beliefs about arousing livestock were all associated with frequent use of forceful handling behaviours by the stockperson. In their previous research at a pig abattoir in Australia, Coleman and others (2003) found that stockpersons who felt under pressure to keep up with the rate of the killing chain and those who believed that it is important to move pigs as quickly as possible tended to be less likely to use the electric prod when it was turned off; that is, as a relatively benign aid to move animals, than did those who believed it is not important to move the pigs quickly. The belief that the way in which pigs are handled when waiting to be slaughtered does not affect pig behaviour was associated with high use of the electric prod when it was turned on, ie as a deliberate aversive stimulus to the pigs. Thus, a particular characteristic of the environment in which stockpersons handle livestock in abattoirs may be the feeling of time pressure and this may increase the likelihood of negative attitudes towards handling pigs and the use of negative interactions when attempting to move the animals quickly. However, there is evidence to show that increased fear in pigs can actually increase the time it takes to move them over a standard route (Hemsworth et al 1994b).

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, cattle handling, sheep, slaughter, stockperson

Introduction

Handling by stockpersons can cause stress to farm animals in many ways. Some of these handling practices are well known and others are less so. There are accumulating international data in a number of livestock industries (eg Hemsworth et al 1989, 2000; Coleman et al 1998; Breuer et al 2000; Lensink et al 2000, 2001; Waiblinger et al 2002; Edwards 2009) that show that a negative attitude by stockpeople towards interacting with pigs, dairy cattle and poultry is correlated with relatively high frequencies of negative behaviours by the stockperson, increased levels of fear and stress in farm animals and, in turn, reduced animal productivity. While most of this research has been on-farm, one study (Coleman et al 2003) has shown similar attitude-behaviour correlations in a pig abattoir. As a consequence of such research, the sequential model shown in Figure 1 has been proposed by Hemsworth and Coleman (2010) to describe the influence of human-animal interactions on the productivity and welfare of intensively managed farm animals.