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A survey of sow management at farrowing in the UK

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Abstract

Farrowing is an important period in pig production, with sow health and piglet mortality representing a welfare issue and an economic loss. Sow health and welfare is critical for piglet survival and good management can improve welfare and productivity. This study investigated the management of sows around farrowing and attitudes of UK pig farmers towards sow pain and difficulty farrowing. Farmers were asked how often they provided night checks, used farrowing induction and administered pharmaceutical products during and after farrowing. Farmers and veterinarians were asked if they used or prescribed anti-inflammatories for farrowing-related health issues. Farmers were asked if pain at farrowing was a problem for gilts and sows and what percentage they considered to have difficulty farrowing. Convenience sampling using a number of distribution methods was used. Sixty-one farmers and 52 veterinarians responded. Of the farmer respondents, ten worked on outdoor and 51 on indoor farms. Night checks were reported as frequently provided and farrowing induction was rare. Many respondents reported using oxytocin substitutes at least sometimes during (74%) or after (54%) farrowing. Azaperone was reported to be used at least sometimes by 45% of respondents during and 33% after farrowing. Farmers indicated that pain at farrowing was more often a problem for gilts than sows and 5% of gilts and 4% of sows were considered to have farrowing difficulty. The high level of supervision around farrowing, with the use of night checks, is encouraging and could improve welfare. Frequent use of oxytocin substitutes, which promote farrowing and milk let-down may negatively impact sow and piglet welfare and could be masking poor mothers that fail to perform well without intervention. This study provides interesting information regarding the management of sows around farrowing, which could inform future research and education to improve sow and piglet welfare in the periparturient period.

Keywords: animal welfare, farrowing, pain, pig, sow management, survey