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-inflammatory for farrowing-related health issues. Farmers were asked if pain at farrowing was a problem for gilts and sow 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

Introduction

In the UK, pre-weaning piglet mortality represents a significant loss to the pig industry and is a welfare issue, with an average live-born mortality of 12.3% indoors and 14.0% outdoors and an average of 0.72 and 0.44 piglets per litter being born dead (BPEX 2014). Management practices, which rely on supervision by farm staff in the early post-parturient period, can significantly improve piglet survival (for literature reviews, see Baxter et al 2013; Kirkden et al 2013a). Farrowing supervision can be facilitated through the use of farrowing induction, causing sows to farrow at a convenient time, when farm staff can be available to supervise. Alternatively, farmers can check on sows at night during farrowing times to deal with any issues that could occur outside of the normal working day.

A number of pharmaceutical products are available to use around farrowing. These include oxytocin and carbetocin (a synthetic analogue of oxytocin), which can be used to increase the frequency and intensity of uterine contractions, to aid the progress of farrowing and initiate milk ejection, to aid in the treatment of mastitis-metritis-agalactia (MMA) or post-partum dysgalactia syndrome (PPDS) (VMD 2011). Azaperone is a sedative that can be used during farrowing to treat aggression towards piglets (savaging), excitation and to enable obstetric assistance. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are licenced to treat conditions involving pain and inflammation in pigs, which could be experienced around farrowing (Mainau & Manteca 2011). These products can be useful tools in the periparturient period, but the inappropriate use of these products has the potential to be detrimental to sow welfare. All these products are classified as POM-V, which means they should be prescribed to an animal or group of animals by a veterinary surgeon following a clinical assessment (National Office of Animal Health [NOAH] 2014). However, repeated veterinary visits for individual pigs is not economically sustainable, so once a condition has been diagnosed and a method of treatment prescribed, further cases, which are recorded by the farmer and checked by the veterinarian on quarterly visits, can be treated by farm staff.