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Stakeholder views on treating pain due to dehorning dairy calves

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Abstract

A common and painful management practice undertaken on most dairy farms is dehorning young calves (also called 'disbudding' when done on calves less than about two months of age). Despite much evidence the practice is painful, and effective means available to mitigate this pain, it is frequently performed without pain relief. The overall aim of this study was to describe different stakeholder views on the use of pain mitigation for disbudding and dehorning. Using an interactive, online platform, we asked participants whether or not they believed that calves should be disbudded and dehorned with pain relief and to provide reasons to support their choice. Participant composition was as follows: dairy producer or other farm worker (10%); veterinarian or other professional working with the dairy industry (7%); student, teacher or researcher (16%); animal advocate (9%); and no involvement with the dairy industry (57%). Of 354 participants, 90% thought pain relief should be provided when disbudding and dehorning. This support was consistent across all demographic categories suggesting the industry practice of disbudding and dehorning without pain control is not consistent with normative beliefs. The most common themes in participants' comments were: pain intensity and duration, concerns about drug use, cost, ease and practicality and availability of alternatives. Some of the participants' reasoning corresponded well with existing scientific evidence, but other reasons illustrated important misconceptions, indicating an urgent need for educational efforts targeted at dairy producers and dairy industry professionals advising these producers.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, calves, dehorning, disbudding, pain