Sheep Mulesing and Animal Lib

Nancy Heneson

The practice of mulesing sheep to prevent blowfly strike has recently come under fire from the Animal Liberation movement in Australia. Although it is only one of the many issues which Animal Lib has raised in its campaign to reform various sectors of the livestock industry, it is particularly illustrative of the kinds of conflicts in world view which arise when animal rights activists turn the spotlight on the farming establishment. Spokesmen for the livestock industries are quick to stress the emotional and sometimes sensational portrayal by Animal Libbers of time-honored animal management practices, as well as the sinister role of the urban press. Animal Libbers, on the other hand, profess a desire to reach a reasonable compromise with the farming community while at the same time proposing legislation which could have serious economic repercussions for the farmer and the consumer. Both sides offer valid arguments, but the debate is often frustrated by a mutual lack of sensitivity and an incomplete understanding of the context in which the other group is operating. Issues which combine economics, social attitudes, ethics and politics are seldom, if ever, clear-cut. Sheep mulesing as it is presently practiced constitutes an animal welfare problem, but it is a problem which is tightly interwoven with the sturdy threads of rural tradition and economic benefit.

Why is Mulesing Practiced?

Mulesing is an operation in which sections of skin as wide as 164 mm and as deep as 94 mm are cut from the buttocks and tail of unanesthetized lambs, usually at marking (2 - 10 weeks) or weaning (4 - 5 months). These areas are stripped to avoid fly and maggot infestation (breechstrike) which can occur in the moist, wool-covered skin folds of the sheep.

John Newman, President of the Sheepmeats Council in Australia, stated in National Farmer (November 29, 1979) that mulesing “if well-done is a rapid operation, but it inflicts pain. But it protects sheep from blowfly strike, which is very painful.” Translated into the language of animal welfare, this statement argues that greater cruelty attaches to leaving sheep unprotected from breechstrike then to subjecting them to a painful but relatively short-lived preventive procedure. If this were the whole story, there would probably not be much resistance to Animal Lib’s call for a safe and humane alternative to mulesing. However, as stated by the New South Wales Department of Agriculture (Agr. Gazette 83:146-147, 1972), mulesing offers additional economic advantages, such as less stained wool and easier mating, lambing and crutching, which can hardly be overlooked in a nation whose live sheep industry yields in the area of $100 million per year. One begins to see why it is no simple task to gather the resources to develop an alternative and then attempt to introduce it into a farming community which views mulesing as economically sound and ethically defensible. This situation certainly does not mean that the possibility of reform should be dismissed, but it does demonstrate the need for impartial research into the development of other methods which would eliminate or reduce the animals’ pain and satisfy the economic requirements of the producer. One way to start is to look at circumstances in another part of the world where sheep are raised without mulesing.

In the southwestern United States, blowfly strike is not as serious a problem as in Australia, but it is still a source of concern to wool growers. When blowflies do strike, an untreated animal usually dies within a short time. Treatment in both the United States and Australia consists of shearing the infested area and applying any of a wide range of insecticides. However, in contrast to mulesing, which is a one-time procedure with permanent results, preventative measures in the US are confined to crutching (annual shearing of the vaginal area) and shearing in the spring, before the wet season. Dr. Maurice Shelton (Texas A&M University) stated that in addition to these routine measures, a stockman might jet spray his sheep with an insecticide if they habitually walk through tall and dewy grass.

It would thus seem that less radical husbandry practices could serve the same purpose as mulesing. Still, Australia represents a special case. The species of blowfly there is resistant to most organophosphate insecticides. There is also a preference for raising Merino sheep, a breed with high wool yield and loose, wrinkled skin which makes the animal very susceptible to breechstrike.

Possible Solutions

Dr. Shelton has pointed out that in the United States, sheep are bred for smoother skin: the less breech wrinkle, the less chance for blowfly infestation. A possible solution to the problem of mulesing is widespread introduction of a breed to Australian producers which combines rapid wool growth with relatively smooth skin. The Rambouillet breed, which is in fact derived from the Merino, already has these characteristics.

Prevention through breeding improvement, without sacrificing either productivity or humane treatment, is an elegant solution in the long term, but the question remains of whether the mulesing operation, which is much more effective than insecticide sprays in Australia, can be modified now to eliminate unnecessary animal suffering and pain.

Traditionally, many livestock operations (castration, dehorning, debeaking, tail docking) have been performed without anesthesia. General or even epidural anesthesia does carry a certain mortality risk which may exceed the risk associated with the operation itself. In livestock production, where economic considerations are constantly influencing standards and practices, anesthetics may represent an additional financial burden to the producer. However, there may be some promise in the idea of developing an inexpensive topical anesthetic which could be incorporated into the mulesing procedure. The Australian Bureau of Animal Health has indicated its willingness to support animal welfare research. Providing the funds for a feasibility study of field anesthesia for mulesing would be one effective way of expressing this support.

Obviously, any attempt to work within the system on mulesing or other animal welfare issues results in compromises which are unacceptable to the
philosophical purists, whether their philosophy falls to the left of Animal Libera­tion or to the right of the hard-core dominionist. However, those who are most directly affected by the changes wrought from the debate between industry and the champions of reform are the farmer, the consumer and the animals themselves. When the needs of more than one group are taken into account, compromise is the most likely outcome.

The farmer may understand his or her animals better than the animal rights philosophers, the animal welfare lobbyist, or the managers of corporate agribusiness. Yet such familiarity with the object of concern does not necessarily imply that other sectors of society should have little or no part in trying to resolve the larger ethical questions of animal exploitation. Animal Lib may not have all the answers, but that does not preclude its ability to serve as a societal watchdog. In order to have maximum impact, however, its efforts must be backed up by data from applied animal welfare science as well as a thorough understanding of the economic arguments of producers and other representatives of the livestock industry. As stated by Wal Shaw, President of the Australian Broiler Growers Council, in an interview with National Farmer (November 29, 1979): “The Animal Lib stir has caused us to look at ourselves — and that’s not a bad thing at all.”

Following consideration of the report of the Brambell Committee, the British government in 1968 took powers under Part I of the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968 to prevent the infliction of unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress to livestock on agricultural land; to make regulations with respect to the welfare of such livestock where such a course was considered appropriate; and to prepare codes of recommendations for the welfare of livestock and to “spend such sums as he (the Minister) thinks fit on the giving of advice, free of charge, to persons concerned with livestock on matters relating to the welfare of livestock.”

Thus it was that the State Veterinary Service (SVS) was given responsibilities for the surveillance of the welfare of livestock kept for farming purposes. In addition to economic pressures, the virtual eradication of such diseases as tuberculosis and the complete eradication of others, e.g., swine fever, has encouraged livestock owners to invest with greater confidence in larger individual livestock units or complexes of such units. These intensive systems are characterized by more animals per unit, less space per animal and mechanical equipment replacing some of the personnel attending to the animals. One man is thus enabled to look after very many animals. We must never forget the importance of that man, the stockman. His competence with and sympathy for his livestock is crucial for their well being. Paradoxically that very confidence to enlarge has meant that today the size of individual units with high stocking densities under systems of intensive management presents problems of entirely different dimensions than in the past in both the disease and welfare context.

There are aspects of certain husbandry systems which to some observers come very close to the dividing line between necessary pain and distress and that which can be described as unnecessary, if the infliction of pain and distress can ever be described as wholly necessary except in very well defined circumstances. It is in this area that most of the problems for the SVS arise, particularly in the determination of whether or not unnecessary pain or distress is being caused.

The philosophy of the SVS approach to livestock inspection is two-fold. First, we believe that animal welfare is inseparable from the majority, if not all, of our work with domestic farm livestock. Indeed as veterinary surgeons, we take an oath “that my constant endeavor will be to the welfare of animals committed to my care.” Second, we believe that prosecution under the 1968 Act should be used as a last resort when all else has failed. That is why since 1968 there have been few prosecutions. We try first of all to be advisers and in advising we seek the help of the owner’s own veterinary surgeon and other colleagues in the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) such as the environmental specialists, the nutritionists, and the surveyors, all of whom are always willing to cooperate.

The specific welfare content of our efforts to achieve these objectives can be divided into two separate parts:

i. “Police” action which is taken in response to the discovery of adverse welfare conditions found at routine inspections or following the investigation of complaints;

ii. The promotion of positive health which can, I believe, be considered to be the study of the relationship between particular systems of animal husbandry and management standards and the need to improve