

PRACTICE ON CASTRATION OF PIGLETS IN EUROPE

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Introduction

“PIGCAS” is the acronym of the project “Attitudes, practices and state of the art regarding piglet castration in Europe” which is a Specific Support Action in the sixth framework programme in the EU. The overall objective of the project is to provide information on pig castration that will support EU policy. The specific objective of work package 2 presented in this paper was to improve knowledge on the extent of the practice of piglet castration and how it is performed in different countries within Europe. For comprehensiveness, all the different kinds of production systems that were active in a country were considered, even those that operated on a smaller scale.

Materials and Methods

Information from the different countries was collected by one national contact person from each country. Stakeholder organisations representing farmers/breeders, veterinarians, the meat industry and Pig health services were contacted and interviewed or asked to fill in a common questionnaire. The data presented are means and distributions of the answers from each country.

Results

In most of the European countries, castration is performed on 80-100% of the male pigs in conventional production. The exceptions are United Kingdom and Ireland where castration is hardly performed at all. Also, in some of the southern countries (Cyprus, Portugal and Spain), a limited percentage of the male pigs is castrated. In these countries, meat from castrates is mainly used for export and production of high quality cured products. In most countries, there seems to be little difference between the percentages of piglets castrated in conventional and non-conventional production systems. The exceptions to this are the Netherlands, where a non-conventional production system exists where castration is no longer performed, and Spain and Portugal, where an extensive production system exists where all piglets are castrated.

For most countries, the mean age at castration is estimated to be in the interval 3-7 days after birth. However, age at castration as well as procedures for castration differ widely both within and between countries. In a majority of the countries, castration is still performed more than two weeks after birth in a minor part of production.

In most countries, castration is performed almost exclusively by the farmers. Exceptions to this are

the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Lithuania and Norway where the majority of castrations are performed by veterinarians. Some countries have special trained personnel to perform castration.

In most countries anaesthesia is not used or used very seldom. In Norway anaesthesia is used for practically all castrations, because it is mandatory by law since 2002. In Lithuania two of four respondents answered that anaesthesia was used commonly or very commonly. In Hungary, Poland and Slovakia most of the respondents answered that anaesthesia was used seldom or not at all, while a few respondents answered that it was used very commonly or always. Different variants of local anaesthesia with lidocain seemed to be most common. The combination of subcutaneous and intratesticular injection was most common. In some countries, general anaesthesia by injection (ketamin, azaperone, methomidata, mopenhium natricum or pentobarbital) was also reported. In most cases where anaesthesia was reported to be used very commonly or always, the percentage of veterinarians performing the castration was reported to be high. But in Hungary and Poland, also the combination of a high percentage of farmers performing the castration and very common use of anaesthesia was reported. Overall, complications due to castration do not seem to be a common problem in any country. However, variations were reported within countries. Castration practices are similar in conventional and organic systems, but differ markedly for some extensive systems.

Within the PIGCAS project, the extent of other possibly painful practices has been assessed. Tail docking and teeth resection is reported to be performed on the majority of animals in most countries. It is most commonly done before castration, but it is also quite commonly performed at the same day as castration. Iron injection is most commonly performed at the same day as castration, while ear tagging, vaccination and tattooing usually are performed later.

Discussion

The results show that castration of male pigs is common in most European countries, but also that some countries find it possible not to castrate. Practices concerning age at castration and how it is performed differ markedly both within and between countries.

References

PIGCAS: <http://w3.rennes.inra.fr/pigcas/index.htm>