

Transportation of animals for slaughter – the role of the veterinary profession

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Introduction

'Safeguarding our Animals, Safeguarding our Reputation – Improving Animal Welfare Compliance in New Zealand' (July 2010), is New Zealand's plan for improving the welfare of New Zealand's animals. At its heart is a partnership between the various stakeholder groups where all those with animal welfare roles encourage voluntary compliance with animal welfare standards and enforce the law when needed.

In the primary production sector, an example where many different parties are involved is the production to processing supply chain. The slaughter/processing plants are a key intervention point within this chain.

Diseased, defective and injured animals presented for slaughter are both a food safety issue and an animal welfare concern due to the pain and/or distress that these animals suffer particularly during transport to slaughter. Under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 it is an offence to transport an animal whose condition or health renders it unfit for such transport.

In 2011, the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) issued the Code of Welfare (Transport within New Zealand). This code describes the minimum standards of care and management that need to be met when transporting animals, and it applies to all species of live animals being transported within New Zealand.

The standards

The Animal Welfare Act 1999 (section 23) defines the offences relevant to the transport of animals:

- a person commits an offence who, without reasonable excuse, transports an animal in a manner that causes the animal unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress.
- a person commits an offence who, being the owner or person in charge of an animal, permits that animal without reasonable excuse to be transported in or on a vehicle, an aircraft, or a ship, while the condition of health of that animal is such as to render it unfit to be so transported.

The Animal Products Act 1999 – Animal Products (Ante-mortem and Post-mortem Examination of Mammals, Ostriches and Emu Intended for Human Consumption) Notice 2006 states that – “animals that are injured, suffering from a disease, or abnormal, must not be accepted for slaughter by an operator without a certificate signed by a veterinarian”.

The Code of Welfare (Transport within New Zealand) Minimum Standard 6 – is concerned with Selecting and Accepting Animals for Transport. Under this Minimum Standard, animals must not be transported if they display any injuries, signs of disease, abnormal behaviour or physical abnormalities that could compromise their welfare during the journey, unless a veterinary declaration of fitness for transport has been issued by a veterinarian following a clinical examination.

While the standards make it clear that compromised animals are required to be accompanied by a veterinary certificate, certifying their fitness for transport for the intended journey, there have been limited attempts to

more clearly define terms like ‘injured, suffering from a disease or abnormal’ that appear in the relevant standards. As a consequence, the industry at large has been left to make individual interpretations of the standard.

As a key industry player, it is here, I believe, that the veterinary profession has a leadership role in defining the standard for the livestock industry in order to achieve a consistent national approach to the welfare of these animals.

A consistent approach

Over recent years MAF have put greater emphasis on monitoring the welfare of animals presented for slaughter.

All MAF Verification Services (MAFVS) veterinarians at slaughter premises are animal welfare inspectors under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 and have an animal welfare monitoring and reporting role as part of their job description.

This provides a good opportunity to assess the level of national compliance with animal welfare standards across the livestock industries. MAFVS staff have a role in educating and raising the awareness of farmers and persons in charge of animals to the relevant animal welfare standards. More serious cases are referred to MAF, Compliance and Response (C & R) for further investigation.

Achieving a nationally consistent approach to animal welfare disposition by over 200 veterinarians is challenging. MAFVS have developed a range of procedures and training tools including E-learning modules to assist with this objective.

MAFVS have elaborated on the outcomes based standards in the codes of welfare and developed prescriptive in house procedures that define ‘injured, suffering from a disease or abnormal’. Prescription is a necessary element when MAFVS are charged with providing a nationally consistent approach to animal welfare dispositions across the New Zealand meat industry.

Reporting

All animal welfare cases, whether they result in an educational response to the farmer or person in charge of the animal, or a referral for further investigation are all reported to a national database. This database is one of the few objective measures that New Zealand has for assessing compliance with animal welfare standards.

Quarterly reports are generated and these are the basis for a wide range of reports to stakeholders that provide more specific information. Many of these reports, for example those to meat companies, provide confidential information relevant to a particular company or industry.

The MAFVS national reporting system has been used to identify trends and specific issues that require a particular procedure or project to be developed. Over the past few years MAFVS have developed procedures and projects related to bobby calves, deer velvet, low body condition, persons with a repeat history, transport issues, and more recently projects related to ‘diseased, defective and injured animals’ and ‘recumbent cattle’.

The diseased, defective and injured animal project is particularly challenging as it seeks to achieve a nationally consistent approach to how farmers, transport operators, livestock agents, livestock traders, livestock slaughter processors, veterinary practitioners and veterinary regulators manage the welfare of compromised animals when there are commercial incentives to send these animals for slaughter, as opposed to electing alternative options for disposal.

Enabling and partnering with industry

Issues with bobby calf mortalities from farm to slaughter six years ago stimulated the initiation of meetings between MAF, meat companies, and the transport industry. These meetings evolved into the Farm to Processor forum with wide representation and terms of reference to address animal welfare issues from farm to slaughter. This forum has worked collaboratively to address a range of welfare related issues that are of importance to livestock production and processing. The New Zealand Veterinary Association is an active member of this forum.

The ‘diseased, defective and injured animals’ requirements have been identified by MAF as a major priority in 2012 under the *Safeguarding our Animals, Safeguarding our Reputation – Improving Animal Welfare Compliance in New Zealand* (July 2010) programme.

MAF is working with the member organisations of the Farm to Processor forum to develop educational programmes to raise awareness of the regulatory requirements and encourage better management of injured, diseased or abnormal animals, and where appropriate that persons in charge seek veterinary examination of compromised animals to assess their suitability for transport.

Current state of compliance

There is significant room for improvement in the level of compliance across the industry with these standards around managing diseased, defective and injured animals. I can say this based on the data that MAF VS has generated over the past few years.

While the MAF standards refer to ‘animals’, traditionally the only species that farmers tend to seek certificates for are bovines and more specifically dairy cattle. It is uncommon for injured, diseased or abnormal, beef cattle, sheep, deer or pigs consigned for slaughter to be accompanied by a veterinary certificate.

Compliance by veterinarians with the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) guidelines and certification requirements is also cause for concern. At many slaughter premises MAFVS veterinarians report that the numbers of veterinary certificates presented that comply with the NZVA guidelines struggle to reach 50%. MAFVS staff regularly hear comments from road transport and meat industry personnel that veterinarians are very unprofessional when providing certificates. A comment was recently made by a meat processor, “Do vets just sign the certificate and leave it to the farmer to fill out the details?”

All too frequently MAFVS veterinarians have the difficult task of providing feedback to their practitioner colleagues that the certificate they have provided does not meet the NZVA guidelines and/or the certification requirements of the Veterinary Council.

The veterinary profession working together

Promoting to farmers and persons in charge of animals the need to seek veterinary examination for compromised animals as a condition of transport presumes that the veterinary profession itself is nationally consistent in the disposition and certification of such animals.

MAFVS and NZVA have worked together over the later part of 2011 on revising both the NZVA guidelines and the MAFVS procedures so that the reference documents and educational material for decision making by all veterinarians provide a platform for a coordinated and linked profession providing consistent messaging to all those in the production and processing chain regarding what is acceptable for transport.

Remembering that welfare codes are outcomes based and do not prescribe what constitutes a compromised animal, the veterinary profession has an opportunity here to define for the livestock industry what is and what is not acceptable.

The NZVA/MAFVS documents will be used as the basis for developing an education and awareness programme during 2012 to ensure that farmers, livestock agents, road transport operators, livestock buyers, livestock processors and all other individuals who are in charge of animals, have a clear understanding of those animals which are not acceptable to transport for slaughter without veterinary certification.

This, I believe, is consistent with the more proactive role that the New Zealand Veterinary Association has decided to take with regard to animal welfare in society. It is also consistent with the expectations of the Veterinary Council of New Zealand of all registered veterinarians and defined in the recently revised Code of Professional Conduct.

The revised NZVA guidelines

The revised guidelines emphasise the general principles that must be kept in mind by veterinarians when asked to certify an animal fit for transport. These include:

1. Transport is inherently stressful for livestock and there is the possibility of injury or exacerbation of any condition for which an animal has been certified. For this reason it is important that the veterinarian provide very clear instructions regarding the how, when and where conditions under which the animal can be transported.
2. There should be minimal risk of the condition suffered by the animal deteriorating from the time of examination until the time of transport. The guidelines now state that the expiry date on

the certificate should not exceed seven days from examination. Animals should arrive at their destination in a state similar to that when initially assessed.

3. The duration of the journey should be the shortest possible. Veterinarians should be aware of the locations of the closest meat slaughter premises and discuss with the person in charge where the animal should be transported to. It is the responsibility of the veterinarian to prescribe the destination on the certificate. Unfortunately too many veterinary certificates leave this section blank. The meat industry is a very competitive and commercial business and if the veterinarian does not give clear instructions the animal could be subjected to very long transport journeys that were not intended or not envisaged by the veterinarian.
4. Veterinarians should not feel pressured into providing a certificate and should only provide a certificate after a comprehensive clinical examination. If in the opinion of the veterinarian the animal is not fit for transport for slaughter there are other options that should be considered including (i) treatment by a veterinarian (ii) humane destruction, without delay, to minimise pain and stress, or (iii) slaughter on farm by an approved pet food operator where the MAF on farm killing for pet food requirements are fulfilled.
5. Veterinarians who are unsure of the suitability or otherwise of animals for transport are strongly advised to contact a MAF Verification Services veterinarian at the intended slaughter premises destination for guidance. The details and phone numbers of MAFVS offices at slaughter premises are kept on the NZVA website www.nzva.org.nz/policies along with the NZVA guidelines on fitness for transport.

Certification

Veterinary certificates are official documents and they are expected to meet the requirements of the VCNZ Code of Professional Conduct. Under the section headed 'Professional Integrity', point (2) states that "veterinarians must maintain the integrity of certification".

When a veterinarian makes a decision to provide a fitness for transport certificate, the following points should be kept in mind:

1. The veterinarian has taken responsibility for the welfare of that animal and must ensure the certification is within VCNZ guidelines.
2. Carefully, accurately, and legibly record the identification of animal(s) certified for transport so it is clear to those along the supply chain which animal the certificate relates to. This is critical to ensure there is no confusion in the subsequent handling of certified animals during transport and lairage.
3. Complete a separate certificate for each animal or for each group of animals with the same or similar condition.
4. Specify the conditions under which the animal(s) are to be transported and state the expiry date on the certificate which should not exceed seven days.
5. Define the slaughter premises that the animal(s) are to be sent to. If the animal(s) end up at another premise it is an issue for the person in charge to explain, not the veterinarian.

Conclusion

MAF and the livestock industry organisations, including NZVA, will over the course of 2012, be promoting a major improvement in the level of national compliance with the requirements for the veterinary certification of diseased, defective and injured animals.

The expectation is that farmers and persons in charge of animals will make more timely decisions about the welfare of compromised animals and/or seek veterinary certification or veterinary treatment. This is consistent with the NZVA policy of wanting to promote a more proactive approach to animal health planning by farmers and veterinarians.

Veterinary certificates of fitness for transport are important documents that are seen by many people in the supply chain. They are a window on the professionalism and competence of the veterinary profession. Poor decision making, laissez faire dispositions, casual certification and inadequate instructions on how the animal(s) are to be managed during transit gives the veterinarian and the wider profession a poor image within the livestock industry.

The responsibility for assessing the welfare of compromised animals is a privilege that has been entrusted to the Veterinary Profession. Not taking this position seriously or being cavalier and unprofessional in the way we go about providing such certification risks the reputation of the profession and our credibility with society, something that NZVA and VCNZ work hard to maintain and enhance.

The presentation that accompanies this paper will use photo and video examples of the more marginal and less obvious cases of diseased, defective and injured animals presented for slaughter. Examples of cases that have been presented both with a veterinary certificate and without a veterinary certificate will be discussed. In addition a series of examples of the good, bad and the ugly of completed veterinary certificates will be discussed.

References

- Animal Welfare (Transport within New Zealand) Code of Welfare 2011. Codes available on MAF's website <http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/animal-welfare>
- Safeguarding our Animals, Safeguarding our Reputation – Improving Animal Welfare Compliance in New Zealand (July 2010). For further information or copies of the document contact Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, PO Box 2526, Wellington