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EU Pig welfare priorities: castration, tail docking and beyond

De Briyne N.¹

¹Federation of Veterinarians of Europe, Brussels, Belgium

Lately, it's all about the pig (and pig farmers and pig veterinarians)

2019 is the Year of the Pig, according to the Chinese lunar calendar. But so far there has been little to celebrate about this, not in China nor in many other countries. Pigs and pig farming have been at the center of the attention for many reasons.

The first is of course **African Swine Fever**, which is sweeping through many countries across the world, including in more than 8 European countries. In Europe, we saw it coming, prepared for it to the extreme, and still have great difficulties to keep the disease at bay. In the meantime, it led already to millions (if not billions) of domestic and wild pigs being culled and it is de-stabilizing the pig meat trade and even financial markets. At the time of writing, the disease has not yet entered Germany or Denmark, who are anxious doing what they can to avoid this at all cost.

The **fight against antimicrobial resistance** is another global and European priority. Under the perspective of "One-Health", it has become in Europe not only a scientific challenge but also a politically loaded one. While the political discussion is mainly around the human antimicrobial resistance burden, the use of antimicrobials for animals have come under great scrutiny. Although science show us that transfer of AMR from animals or animal products is only responsible for a smaller part of resistance problems in humans, the impact of the use of antibiotics in animals cannot be ignored. This has especially its repercussions in the pig sector, which has traditionally been an antibiotic dependent sector. Already in 2016, the European Medicines Agency urged all European countries to limit colistin use (much used in the pig sector) to a minimum. At the same time, many efforts were already done and are continuing to reduce the total amount of use of other antibiotics in pig farming and especially critically important antibiotics to an absolute minimum.

Another issue getting more and more attention in Europe and worldwide are **environmental issues and climate change**. For environmental reasons, by 2022, Europe's pig producers have to know how to wean pigs without using zinc oxide. After this date, zinc oxide can only be used in pigs as a nutritional component, at levels of 150 ppm. Looking at the impact of animal farming on our climate, pigs also do not score very

well. At the comparison of the full life cycle of greenhouse emissions from animal products, pork comes out only as the second worst, after cattle, in most calculations.

And last, but not least, the **welfare of farmed pigs** has become under close scrutiny in the European Union. Enforcing legislation on the welfare of pigs, such as in respect to tail docking, live animal transport and slaughter of pigs, is currently one of the European Commission's priorities in the area of animal welfare.

EU legislation in respect to the welfare of pigs The EU has strict legislation in respect to the welfare of pigs. In 1986, the Council of Europe adopted its first recommendation on pig welfare, which was revised in 2004. The first European Union rules on pig welfare were established in 1991 with Directive 91/630/EEC. The 1991 Directive has been amended several times and substantially updated by Directive 120/2008/EC (hereby called the Pig Directive). In addition to these specific pig welfare legislations, European Union cross-sector animal welfare legislation exists such as in respect to transport and slaughter. Legislation adopted at a European Union level, has to be transposed into national legislation by all EU Member States. This was done quickly and efficiently for the Pig Directive. However, one particular aspect of the Pig Directive continues to cause difficulties in respect to implementation and enforcement, namely the ban on routine tail docking and the need to always give pigs suitable and sufficient enrichment materials. In my presentation, I will mainly focus on pig welfare issues in relation to tail docking, provision of enrichment materials and only shortly touch on pig castration.

Already since 1994 (25 years ago!), EU legislation stipulated that tail docking could not be done routinely and that, to prevent tail biting, enrichment materials such as straw or other suitable materials should be provided to satisfy the behavioural needs of pigs. Among other provisions, and compared to previous legislation, the Pig Directive specifies the measures that must be undertaken before a farmer can resort to tail docking (i.e., addressing management, stocking density, and providing specific enrichment materials). Nevertheless, tail docking is still practiced routinely in many European countries, in violation of these provisions. In Finland and Sweden, due to stricter national rules compared to EU legislation, tail docking is no longer allowed. Outside the EU, in Norway and Switzerland less than 5% of the pigs are tail-docked. Routine tail docking is also carried out in many countries outside Europe. In the last 5 years, great efforts have been done by European decision makers to assist Member States to facilitate better implementation and enforcement

of the relevant rules regarding tail docking and provision of enrichment materials. These include financing research projects regarding pig welfare (e.g., EuWellNet, FareWellDock [37]), study visits, recommendations, audits, factsheets and many others. In 2017, the European Commission launched an EU action plan and asked all Member States to develop national action plans as the main tool to improve compliance with the Pig Directive. Despite all these efforts, non-compliance remains high. Mid-2019, the EU action plan to facilitate the rearing of pigs with intact tails will end; it will be evaluated and a future approach needs to be decided. Potential future approaches include 1/ to prolong the action plan and continue with a guidance-based approach, or 2/ to start infringement procedures.

One other much debated pig welfare issue is around pig castration. In 2010, the 'European Declaration on alternatives to surgical castration of pigs' was agreed. The Declaration stipulates that from January 1, 2012, surgical castration of pigs shall only be performed with prolonged analgesia and/or anaesthesia and from 2018 surgical castration of pigs should be phased out altogether. Despite the support and efforts of many, the deadlines of January 1, 2012 and 2018 were far from being met. The opinions on the animal-welfare-conformity and the practicability and efficiency of the alternatives to surgical castration are widely dispersed. Although countries using analgesia/anaesthesia routinely found this method practical and effective, only few countries seem to aim at meeting the deadline to phase out surgical castration completely.

Let's be clear on one point: concerns about pig welfare will not go away in Europe. Just in 2018, an EU-wide public facing campaign collected over 1 million signatures from European citizens calling upon the European Commission and Member States to fully enforce this 25-year old legislation and to also tackle the problem of surgical piglet castration without pain relief. Numerous European Petitions and European Parliament questions keep being raised in respect to pig welfare. Farm animal welfare is and will remain of paramount importance for European citizens, as shown by the results of the last special Eurobarometer on Animal Welfare.

Never waste a good crisis

ASF, need to reduce antibiotics, welfare concerns regarding pig farming, etc., counting it all up it is clear that the pig sector is going through a crisis moment. And as said by several prominent world leaders: never let a good crisis go to waste.

The EU has a self-sufficiency of about 111% for pig meat and exports about 13% of its total production. The EU is the first global exporter of pig meat worldwide and arguably wants to maintain this position.

Now is the time to reflect how we can make European pig production future proof. How can we make pig farming more sustainable, more fair and secure for pig producers, less sensitive to diseases or disasters, less antibiotic dependent and more welfare friendly and societally accepted?

The European livestock farming sector is concerned that EU animal welfare legislation is causing a competitive disadvantage for EU products on the global market. However, this is not true, as shown by a 2018 Commission report looking at the impact of animal welfare on the competitiveness of European livestock producers. The overall costs of compliance with animal welfare standards are very low compared to other production costs (such as the cost of labour and feed) and on the contrary, better welfare increases the image (and price given for) the product.

Need for increased veterinary expertise!

Since the beginning of the farm animal welfare debate half a century ago, the focus has been on the negative side of animal welfare, with most research studying the harms induced by modern husbandry to animals and how to prevent them. The same is true for diseases, much efforts have been put on how to prevent and treat specific diseases. The time has come to change this approach, looking more at how can we promote positive welfare and robust animals. The role of the veterinarian has never been of greater importance to achieve this. Veterinary expertise is needed to make sure animal breeding is focusing on robust animals and to prevent diseases entering the farm. 'Prevention is better than cure'. We need to look at keeping piglets healthy and happy from all possible angles. Animals that are well cared for and appropriately housed, will experience a better welfare, be less prone to infections and will need fewer antibiotics.

Veterinarians also can act as 'gatekeeper' to ensure correct use of antibiotics and advise their clients on how to prevent diseases, thereby limiting the need to treat animals with antibiotics. Veterinarians in addition can help educate and raise awareness among their clients to ensure correct and responsible use of antibiotics in animals.

Experience learned from the fight against antibiotic resistance, shows us that the success heavily depends on the commitment and willingness of all actors in the field to work together and to take actions. Farmers and the veterinary profession play a key role in this. Veterinarians should continue to strengthen their advisory role and competencies to support and educate farmers. The profession should continue to strengthen the position of the veterinarian, such as through having mandatory animal health plans with a contracted responsible veterinarian per farm.

Through a close farmer and veterinary relationship, more efforts can be done to prevent animals becoming sick and to ensure animals are kept in good welfare. Regular animal health visits by veterinarians to farms are obligatory under the EU 'Animal Health Law'. Many countries already partly introduced regular veterinary visits, however, the frequency, topics covered and type (obligatory or voluntary) of visits very much differs. For pig farms, in 15 out of 24 analysed European Union countries it is mandatory to have preventive animal health farm visits. Most of these visits (93,3%) only focus on national health control programs. There is huge potential to improve the value of these preventive veterinary visits, working through a whole sector approach with two-way information between the farm, the private and official veterinarian, the slaughterhouse and by covering a holistic approach looking at animal health, medicines use, biosecurity, animal welfare and food safety.

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