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# End 'cruel' religious slaughter, say scientists

## Beasts should be stunned before their throats are slit, Jews and Muslims are told

BY MARTIN HICKMAN, CONSUMER AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT | MONDAY 22 JUNE 2009

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Religious slaughter techniques practised by Jews and Muslims are cruel and should be ended, says a scientific assessment from the Government's animal welfare advisers.

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The Farm Animal Welfare Council says that slitting the throats of the animals most commonly used for meat, chickens, without stunning, results in "significant pain and distress". The committee, which includes scientific, agricultural and veterinary experts, is calling for the Government to launch a debate with Muslim and Jewish communities to end the practice.

One Muslim organisation, the Halal Food Authority, already insists on the slaughterhouses it regulates stunning animals first on welfare grounds, as long as they are still alive when their throats are slit. But in other halal and almost all kosher slaughterhouses, animals have their throats slit without prior stunning which would render them insensible to the pain. Religious groups say that doing so would be against their interpretation of religious texts.

They are granted an exemption to the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995, which stipulates that creatures such as cows, goats and chickens be stunned first.

In a report into the slaughter of white meat, the Farm Animal

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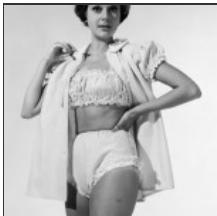
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Welfare Council (Fawc) said evidence suggested that chicken and turkeys were likely to be conscious for up to 20 seconds as blood seeped out of them. The animals are killed by a transverse incision across their neck, cutting skin, muscle, trachea, oesophagus, carotid arteries, jugular veins and major nerves.

"Such a large cut will inevitably trigger sensory input to pain centres in the brain," the council said. "Our conclusions ... are that such an injury would result in significant pain and distress ... before insensibility supervenes. Fawc is in agreement with the prevailing scientific consensus that slaughter without pre-stunning causes pain and distress. On the basis that this is avoidable and in the interests of welfare, Fawc concludes that all birds should be pre-stunned before slaughter."

While recognising the difficulties of reconciling scientific findings with matters of faith, it urged the Government to "continue to engage with religious communities" to make progress. In a 2003 report on red meat, Fawc called for ministers to repeal the religious groups' legal opt-out.

The Shechita Council, which oversees kosher meat, was contacted but did not supply a comment. Massood Khawaja, president of the Halal Food Authority, insisted that its animals were stunned, unlike those regulated by another group, the Halal Monitoring Committee. "The Koran says use your brain, ponder about things and that's what we are doing," he said. "It's a question of animal welfare."

The Government no longer keeps statistics on religious slaughter, but five years ago, the Meat Hygiene Service suggested 114 million animals were killed under halal and 2.1 million under kosher methods each year in Britain.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said it would not change its "long-standing policy of religious tolerance" by ending the opt-out. "And while the Government would prefer to see all animals stunned before slaughter, we will continue to ensure that required standards of animal welfare are effectively monitored and enforced in all slaughterhouses," it said in a statement.

Last year, Lord Rooker, a minister in the department, called for meat slaughtered without stunning to be labelled for the public's benefit, since some cuts were considered unacceptable to eat, and sold back into the food chain.

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Last night, the vegetarian organisation Viva!, Tom Lane, said: "How many times does the Government's own advisory committee on animal welfare have to ask for a ban on slaughter without pre-stunning before action is taken? Viva! embraces multiculturalism and all religious faiths, but the suffering of these animals is so extreme that a line has to be drawn somewhere."

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