Consumers and pork Part two – acceptance of boar taint vaccination

The first article in this series about consumer attitudes showed that the eating quality of pork produced using vaccination as a method of reducing boar taint is as good as pork from females or castrates; it is even better than the pork produced from non-vaccinated entire boars even when slaughtered at light weights.

While eating quality is obviously a key factor in consumer acceptance, we also have to consider acceptability of the practices applied on pig farms, especially in terms of animal welfare.

Piglet castration is undoubtedly a painful procedure and has been shown to increase infections, hernias and pre-weaning mortality. In short, it is not conducive to good animal welfare. Legislators, animal welfare groups and veterinarian associations all support a move away from this method in favour of more animal friendly alternatives, such as boar taint vaccination.

Timid moves, like applying pain killers, are clearly not seen as sufficient and a number of animal welfare groups have become impatient to see a change to practices which deliver a real improvement in terms of animal welfare. The recent declaration by European stakeholders for a complete ban on castration by 2018 with a number of conditions is perceived as not going far enough; solutions are readily available and are already implemented in a number of countries in Europe and elsewhere with or without a specific ban of castration written into the legislation.

What about consumers?

Listening to its customers, Colruyt, one of Belgium's leading food retailers, announced last year its decision to stop selling pork from castrated pigs. Instead, its suppliers now use vaccination.

The company had conducted its own taste tests comparing various options: meat from vaccinated boars rated excellent and was found at least as good as meat from castrated pigs. Standing up for strong values like the promotion of animal welfare and farming sustainability, but without compromising quality, Colruyt proudly meets consumers' expectations.

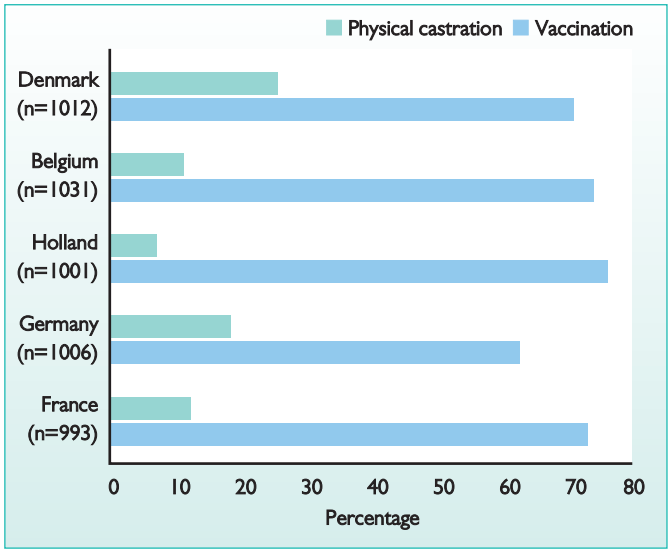

Fig. 1. Results of consumer market research.

This decision follows a number of results from consumer market research conducted among over 5,000 regular pork consumers in five EU states in 2008-9. It revealed that the vast majority prefer the idea of vaccination to castration even under anaesthesia.

In France 71% preferred vaccination compared to 12% for physical castration with anaesthesia; 17% were neutral. In the Netherlands a similar result was obtained: 74% vaccination, 7% castration. Similar results were obtained from consumers in Denmark, Belgium or Germany (Fig. 1). These results confirm earlier surveys conducted in Switzerland (2007), Sweden (2005) and Australia (2000).

In Switzerland, 60% of those interviewed said they would try to eat only pork that had been produced using vaccination; only 5% said they would try to eat only pork raised using castration. In Australia, where vaccination has been used commercially for over a decade, no consumers had any concerns over the use of Improvac for the routine reduction of boar taint, and vaccination was preferred to physical castration; all participants were happy to serve Improvac pork to their families.

The awareness of methods currently used in food animal production, such as physical castration, is low among the general public. Therefore, in order to assess the acceptability of different methods, the market research studies included an educational element prior to the questionnaire. Indeed, an analysis of results from three separate studies by Professor Verbeke, from Ghent University in Belgium, found that acceptance of the vaccination method increased over time and with the provision of accurate information. More recently, in October last year, a survey was conducted by the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach among 1,786 German citizens. They were asked about their consumption of pork and their knowledge and attitude towards castration and vaccination.

While Germany is one of the countries in Europe where the debate around pig castration continues to capture industry stakeholders, consumers and media attention, the survey confirmed the strength of the pork market: seven out of 10 of those questioned said they buy pork and 41% eat pork every week or several times a month. The results, which were presented at the EuroTier exhibition in Hannover, Germany last year, revealed that only 37% of the people questioned had heard of boar taint and only 24% knew about castration.

After being given a brief introduction to boar taint and to both castration and vaccination as methods to reduce boar taint, they were then asked which they found more acceptable. The proportion of respondents preferring vaccination was more than twice the proportion of those preferring castration and a number were yet undecided. The main reason for preferring vaccination was the fact that it caused less stress and pain.

More acceptable method

The move to find more acceptable methods of raising male pigs while avoiding a high risk of boar taint is underway. As the debate around animal welfare intensifies, consumer awareness of practices like piglet castration grows. The experience of markets such as Belgium shows just how quickly a new practice that is readily available, such as vaccination to reduce boar taint, can be implemented to the benefit of animals, consumers and all stakeholders.

At EU level, the pressure to ban castration continues to increase and a total phasing out looks more and more likely. The fact that vaccination is the only commercially proven method to raise entire males without boar taint, means that this method is likely to be adopted more and more by swine producers in the next few years.

The fact that this practice is acceptable to consumers both in terms of eating quality and on welfare grounds, means that retailers can have the confidence that they will meet the demand of their customers who are requesting more and more of their suppliers to make it part of their routine practice. ■

References are available from the author on request