

## **Scottish Council of Jewish Communities briefing in relation to PE1118**

### **“Animal slaughter without pre-stunning”**

The previous Executive associated itself with DEFRA's response to a FAWC report on the welfare of farmed animals at slaughter, which recognised that separate pre-stunning (as opposed to stunning in the process of slaughter itself) is not compatible with the requirements of Jewish and Muslim religious law because it results in injury and possibly pain for the animal. DEFRA's response asserted, in no uncertain terms, the Government's respect for the rights of religious groups to observe the requirements of their faith.

Furthermore, on 14 January 2008, Richard Lochhead, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, replied to parliamentary question S3W-8024 from Cathy Jamieson by confirming that

*“Although the slaughter of animals without pre-stunning does not take place in Scotland, it would be perfectly legal for this method to be used in Scottish slaughterhouses. The slaughter of sheep without pre-stunning for religious reasons is legal throughout the EU and to ban the export of sheep would contravene free trade rules and would be illegal under EU law.”*

### **Other methods of slaughter**

A number of animal welfare agencies, including the RSPCA, have found many instances of inefficient or misapplied mechanical or other stunning techniques causing unnecessary suffering to animals<sup>1</sup>. It is estimated that 2.4 million of the 26.3 million red meat animals slaughtered in the UK each year are mis-stunned, which is more than 25 times the total number of animals killed by *shechitah* (slaughter for the kosher market) – a fact which alone impugns the motives of those purporting to oppose *shechitah* on animal welfare grounds.

There are also data to suggest that the stunning techniques widely employed may cause substantial pain even when applied in the prescribed fashion. Mechanical stunning is a technique in which a severe blow is delivered to the head of the animal. This entails a massive sympathetic discharge, which might be taken to indicate a very large stress response.

Other methods used for the general market include gassing and electrocution. Both are extremely unreliable, and there is no lack of human evidence of the painfulness of both processes.

Finally, there is some evidence that captive bolt stunning may be associated with risk of transmission of infection, including prion diseases such as variant Creutzfeld-Jacob disease (vCJD) in association with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)<sup>2</sup>.

### **Slaughter of animals for the kosher market**

By contrast, *Halachah* (Jewish Law) requires that animals be treated with consideration, kindness and respect. With regard to the use of animals for food, *halachah* states that, if meat is to be eaten, animals must be slaughtered in a prescribed humane way, known as *shechitah*.

There is a popular misconception that the production of kosher food requires the performance of some "ritual". This is false. Kosher food is simply food that is supervised by someone competent to ensure that it complies with Jewish religious law. Neither is kosher food "blessed by a rabbi", as is sometimes thought. It is the case that a *shochet* (person who performs *shechitah*) will say a short prayer (a *brachah* which is misleadingly translated as "blessing"), but this does not refer to the animal or its meat, but serves to remind him of the religious nature of the task he is about to perform, and that it is governed by detailed rules, including the requirement to avoid causing the animal any distress. The contrast with the gallows humour and cavalier disregard for animal (and sometimes human) suffering in a commercial factory abattoir could hardly be more stark.

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<sup>1</sup> The Slaughter of Food Animals, RSPCA Farm Animals Information leaflet, June 2007

<http://www.rspca.org.uk/servlet/BlobServer?blobtable=RSPCABlob&blobcol=urlblob&blobkey=id&blobwhere=1109267162632&blobheader=application/pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Dissemination of central nervous system tissue from the brain and spinal cord of cattle after captive bolt stunning and carcass splitting, DM Prendergast, JJ Sheridan, DJ Dalya, DA McDowell and IS Blair, Meat Science, December 2003

We note that on the e-petition discussion forum the petitioner refers to a video in which “an animal slaughtered without stunning has stumbled about on its legs for several minutes with its throat ripped out”. We share Mr Rowan’s grave concern about such inhumane treatment, and emphasise that this is not *shechitah*. Meat from an animal that died in that manner would not be kosher, and it would, therefore be contrary to a slaughterhouse’s financial interests to dispatch an animal in such a way, quite apart from the religious and moral imperatives.

According to *halachah* an animal intended for food must be healthy and uninjured at the time of slaughter, and must be dispatched by a single cut to the throat that produces instant unconsciousness by causing an instant and almost total loss of blood pressure in the brain. This results in the immediate and irreversible cessation of consciousness and sensibility to pain, and therefore constitutes stunning as defined in Scottish law, namely “any process which causes immediate loss of consciousness which lasts until death”<sup>3</sup>.

This is achieved by severing the frontal structures at the neck, including the trachea, oesophagus, the carotid arteries and jugular veins, in a single rapid and uninterrupted action, using a surgically sharp knife. The *shochet* is required to examine the knife before and after every procedure to ensure the instrument remains perfectly smooth, without the minutest notch or irregularity.

*Shechitah* is the only method permitted by *halachah* to enable Jews to eat meat – stunning by methods other than *shechitah*, for example captive-bolt or electricity, renders an animal forbidden to Jews for food.

### **The issue of suffering**

In stark contrast with the practice in abattoirs slaughtering for the general market, *halachah* mandates that each animal must be brought individually to *shechitah*, and must not see any other animal killed, or even see the blood from an animal that has already been killed.

Pain is intrinsically subjective and as such cannot be objectively assessed. However observation of behavioural responses and non-specific features such as heart rate, blood pressure or neurohormonal responses do not lead to the conclusion that *shechitah* causes pain.

For the sensation of pain, a functioning cerebral cortex is required along with a peripheral stimulus of adequate intensity. However scientific studies<sup>4</sup> have shown that, following the *shechitah* incision there is a drastic and rapid fall in cerebral blood flow that inactivates the cerebral cortex by depriving it of its blood supply, immediately leading to a rapid and irreversible loss of consciousness. Furthermore, the extreme sharpness of the knife, coupled with the smoothness of the incision, mean that there is minimal stimulation of the edges of the cut, typically below a level adequate to activate the pain pathways.

### **Effect on the Jewish community of a ban on slaughter without pre-stunning**

A threat to *shechitah* would have the practical effect of making it more difficult for Scotland’s Jewish community to obtain kosher meat. However, we are also concerned that the subject of animal slaughter without pre-stunning can sometimes be used as camouflage for antisemitic and islamophobic agendas.

For example, whilst hosted on the e-petition website, PE1118 attracted discussion forum comment such as “*Since Scotland is not, never has been and god forbid, ever will be an islamic country we might at least expect those from such countries with islamic or otherwise similar cruel methods of animal slaughter (the [sic] do it on humans as well) to be aware that if intending to become part of our community they must also observe and respect our laws and ways of life. If they don't like it they should be free to leave.*”

There has unfortunately been a significant increase in the number of antisemitic and islamophobic incidents in Scotland during the last few years<sup>5</sup>, and it is clear that some people take comfort from any perceived criticism of Jewish or Muslim practice.

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<sup>3</sup> The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 (SI 1995 No. 731)

<sup>4</sup> For example: Physiological Insights into Shechita, SD Rosen, Veterinary Record, June 12, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Antisemitic Incident Report 2006, The Community Security Trust  
[http://www.thecst.org.uk/docs/Incidents\\_Report\\_06.pdf](http://www.thecst.org.uk/docs/Incidents_Report_06.pdf)