

Dairy worker perspectives on performing euthanasia as an essential component of their job

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Objective

This study aims to fill the knowledge gap of how euthanasia methods, procedures, and training affect dairy caretaker attitudes towards performing on-farm euthanasia, job satisfaction and sense of well-being.

Abstract

Euthanasia is a critical component of dairy management as it provides a way to alleviate animal suffering. Limited research explores dairy worker perspectives regarding their role in performing euthanasia or the impact of this practice on worker wellbeing. Additionally, training offered to caretakers is inconsistent in content and frequency and lacks cultural congruence. This project aimed to identify how euthanasia methods, procedures, and training affect caretaker attitudes towards performing on-farm euthanasia, job satisfaction and sense of well-being of dairy workers and managers. Focus groups, facilitated by Colorado State University researchers, were conducted at five large Colorado dairies. Thirty-eight animal caretakers (workers. n=29; managers. n=8; and veterinarians, n=1) participated in focus groups according to their job description and language of choice (English or Spanish). Focus groups were recorded for subsequent transcription and translation. Thematic analysis was performed to identify recurring themes in the transcripts. Themes that emerged from the focus groups included: stressors related to physical, work, and social environments; euthanasia techniques, frequency, process, decision making, and who performs this task; the language used when referring to euthanasia; animal welfare; and the effect of the human-animal bond on euthanasia decision-making and performing euthanasia. Preliminary analysis of themes indicated that multiple factors influence how euthanasia is performed and the euthanasia decision-making process. Additionally, euthanasia and jobrelated tasks were identified as sources of stress for dairy workers. Strength of the human-animal bond and worker compassion towards the animals they care for were evident for all participants. Initial analysis showed a lack of caretaker awareness regarding mental health services available in their community. Training programs on dairy farms should incorporate worker health and safety, particularly as it pertains to performing euthanasia, and address the mental wellbeing of dairy workers. Information regarding mental health services in the community should also be accessible to caretakers.

Background

- •Most research of euthanasia impacts on worker well-being revolves around animal shelters & veterinary clinics for companion animals
- •Workers experience the stress of killing animals they have developed relationships with deemed the "Care-killing paradox" (Arluke, 1994)
- Dread or stress of performing euthanasia affects workers but on different levels ranging from no stress to large amounts of stress(Matthis, 2004)
- Generally there is limited availability or knowledge of mental health
- Most common forms of support or relief at these jobs are training/ education, informal support, staff rotation, & breaks (Anderson et al., 2013)
- There is a serious need for a comprehensive euthanasia training and education to be available for dairy caretakers (Hoe & Ruegg, 2006)

Methodology

- . 20 interview questions developed by multidisciplinary team (IRB #19-9055H)
- Outreach to 5 farms in Colorado
- 3. 12 focus groups held & recorded in either English or Spanish for approximately 1 hour with 38 participants
- 4. Participants given \$25 gift card as incentive
- 5. Translation & Transcription of focus group transcripts
- Coding themes were agreed upon by 8 researchers after reading transcripts
- 7. Coding for themes by 3 researchers which had 90% agreement on coding

Coding Themes

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Language referring to euthanasia

 Language used to describe euthanasia is related to the level of training and how comfortable workers feel with the process

Findings

This word cloud was created to represent words and phrases used by participants

Euthanasia Techniques & Processes

- Large variation between farms
- More training indicated there was a better understanding of the euthanasia process

Training Programs

- Training and communication varied greatly from farm to farm
- Large variations of euthanasia procedures/methods/timing/ decision-making from farm to farm

Physical Environment

 Physical environment was expressed as both a negative or a positive part of working on a dairy

Work Environment

- Demands weren't always explained or appeared unreasonable
- · Communication between managers and workers needs improvement

Social Environment

- Workers were bringing home stress from work
- Some would talk to spouses or family about work issues

Animal Welfare & Human Animal Bond

- Caretakers expressed strong desires to care for animals and to 'do what is best for the animal'
- Caring for sick animals was a large source of stress for many caretakers

Training should include:

Takeaways

- · Variations between training, communication, & euthanasia protocols
- · Human-animal bond is strong regardless of training level
- Euphemisms used to describe euthanasia was related to amount of training
- · Low awareness of mental health resources for caretakers

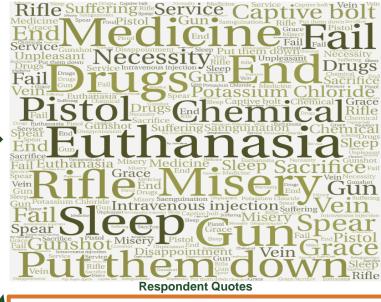
Communication between workers and managers

Explanation on how and why euthanasia is performed

Resources for mental health services

Worker health and safety

Mental wellbeing of caretakers performing euthanasia



"... I can't tolerate the cold and I have to tolerate it and it is a challenge for me."

"...I wouldn't like to do it [euthanasia]. Right? But in the end what counts [is] them [management] that are the last word and they have us here to work."

"Well you go home with that, completely stressed all of the time"

"... You have a cow that you've taken care of and who has worked with you and helped you to have a nice business and take care of your family and is hard when you see an old cow and she looks at you like "I just don't feel good"."

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