



by Mark Hardesty, D.V.M.

Let's leave painful dehorning in the past

THE winter sky was dreary, and it entertained discussions of partly cloudy versus partly sunny. The dullness of the weather was in contrast to the sharp sounds of metal on metal of the cattle chute. There was the grunt as the veterinarian placed the head bars on the yearling's poll and bridge of nose, and the rattle of the rump pipe being moved through the ratchets, tilting the head forward in the head bars.

In those days, there was no silent pause as a lidocaine nerve block was placed over the corneal nerve before the signature cutting sound of bone and horn tissue being severed from the skull, followed by the moan, bellow, or wail of pain from the yearling. This would be followed by a period of hearing the veterinarian talking to himself as he pulled blood vessels and possibly applied blood stop powder.

That scene was from 30 years ago, and it filled my every afternoon from October to April during my first two years in practice. This was considered normal, but not anymore.

We had a time period, 20 years ago, when we thought giving a local block, and perhaps an oral analge-

sic, made dehorning cattle over 2 months of age okay. That time, too, has now passed.

We have moved into the time where most calves are disbudded at less than 2 months of age using local nerve blocks and oral analgesia. We are still in that time, but there are people pushing for naturally polled dairy cattle to avoid the pain of dehorning altogether. Where is your farm on the dehorning timeline?

**Hardesty**

Change the mindset

There are change seekers and change resisters or avoiders. I'm a change seeker.

The veterinary practice I purchased saw dehorning as a significant income source. I saw other opportunities for the dairies we served. When I dehorned those yearlings, I asked where the younger ones were. I showed dairymen how electric dehorning was quicker and easier with less trauma for the calves than using a gouge. It just took the foresight to get it done.

One argument I heard from farmers was that they didn't have time to dehorn calves in the summer because they were busy with crops. The best time for dehorning was at 2 to 6 weeks old, so I would just dehorn the calves when we did the monthly repro check on the cows.

Over the years, dairymen have moved to doing these procedures themselves. Some still use the electric dehorners with the hassle of stringing out an electric cord, but many have converted to one of the gas-fired dehorners.

Unfortunately, some of them may have missed the training on pain control. There is an economic gain to pain control as those calves eat better, grow better, and most importantly, interact more appropriately with humans for the rest of their lives.

It is also the right thing to do. I have a lot of respect for the dairymen that have said, "This is a task that we must get right. Please, train me or my staff so we can do a good job." Remember, there are people pushing for us to use only polled genetics to avoid the issues of dehorning.

At some dairies, we have a deal that if the calves aren't dehorned up to a certain age when we are on the farm, we will do them to keep them from getting too big. I'm okay with fixing the scurs that result from a botched job of horn removal, but I'd also be okay with never hav-

ing to do that.

If your current program includes removing horns from cattle over 2 months of age, there is room for improvement. There may be opportunity to cause less pain, have calves eat better, and probably use less labor when done earlier.

Control the pain

Lidocaine nerve blocks are the first level of pain control, and I have trained many to do this in a short session. Lidocaine is inexpensive and has few side effects at the appropriate doses.

When I started incorporating these blocks in every calf that I disbudded, this task went from a dreaded wrestling match to a job to do that wasn't too bad. There is no reason for a calf over a week of age to be disbudded without the benefit of a lidocaine nerve block.

The next level of pain control is some form of analgesia that lasts up to 24 hours, long after the nerve block wears off. These would include Flunixin or Meloxicam. These products are not labeled for pain control in the U.S., but in a culture that is asking us for pain mitigation, these products are widely used and accepted as appropriate.

Work with your veterinarian to develop protocols for appropriate pain control. Flunixin, of course, needs to be given by IV, so it presents challenges especially in small calves. There is now a product called Banamine Transdermal, and while it is not yet approved for pain control of dehorning either, veterinarian-developed protocols can incorporate it as an extra-label drug.

Meloxicam has been widely studied, and advocated for pain control at dehorning. Tablets can be put in the milk the morning of dehorning or they can be placed in gel caps and passed orally with a balling gun.

Moving forward with paste

A good way to avoid gouge dehorning is to paste dehorn. This must be done within 3 days of birth

or the percentage of horns that regrow rises. Regrown horns are worse than first growth because the vascular pattern is disrupted and the horn structure is not normal. We want to avoid regrowths. Some operators have tried paste and had many problems while others do well.

First, the calf cannot be pasted and put out in the rain where the paste can run down into its eye or face. We like to give a local block when we paste so the calf is less likely to rub the irritating paste. The most successful operators clip the area of the horn bud to be sure it is well visualized before they apply the paste. Some put duct tape over the paste to minimize rubbing, while others just feed the calves their milk meal after the paste is applied to encourage the calves to lay down rather than rub their heads.

The sounds of gouge dehorning are largely in my past, and they should be in yours, too. Our future replacements deserve a better way of having horns removed. You may have good plans for horn removal, but if the plan isn't working out, get your veterinarian involved!

The author is a partner in the Maria Stein Animal Clinic, Maria Stein, Ohio.

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