A VETERINARY PERSPECTIVE

on the RMAA conference

by Dr Fae Adams

As a CCS (compulsory community service) vet working in the Western Cape Department of Agriculture’s Veterinary Public Health (VPH) programme, myself and a few of my VPH colleagues were invited to attend the Red Meat Abattoir Association (RMAA) annual conference at the Spier Wine Estate outside Stellenbosch earlier this year.

The RMAA is an association that represents the owners of abattoirs across South Africa. The mission of the annual RMAA conference is to give members of the meat industry an opportunity to explore the latest developments and newest equipment from around the world, and through lectures and presentations develop newer, more optimised methods of converting livestock into safe meat products for the public. Various topics, such as waste management, bacterial contamination of carcasses, water usage, animal welfare and independent meat inspection, were presented.

The recent devastating drought brought home the fact that South Africa is a country with extremely limited water resources. In light of this, a major focus of presentations at this year’s conference was around the methods of re-use, recycling and reduced usage of water at abattoirs. Water is used in every step of the processing of an animal carcass – from the cleaning of the delivery vehicle, through slaughtering, cleaning of equipment, buildings and lairages to the cleaning of dispatch vehicles. For example, on average the production of a single beef carcass utilises 900 litres of water. An abattoir simply cannot function without an adequate supply of clean water, as all the hygiene practices rely on it.

The status of controlled and notifiable diseases, such as foot and mouth disease (FMD), brucellosis, bovine tuberculosis (TB), anthrax, snotsiet and Rift Valley fever, were also discussed. It has become obvious that brucellosis control measures need reassessment as the number of outbreaks,
especially around the Gauteng region, has greatly increased. Brucellosis poses a zoonotic risk to veterinary officials and individuals working directly with animal products in abattoir plants. The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is aware of these risks and is making an effort to reduce them by updating the brucella manual whilst working on a strategic plan for dealing with the disease.

Another important point raised was the need to provide private vets with more regulatory responsibilities, as there is a great need for more veterinary presence at abattoirs. There are approximately 70 abattoirs across the Western Cape, with only eight VPH officials, one technical manager and one state veterinarian guiding and inspecting all these plants. Although abattoirs are audited once a year, it is far more important to observe daily abattoir practice. Regular independent monitoring is vital to ensure plants maintain these rigorous standards on a daily basis. Food safety and traceability in South Africa need to be improved – the regulations are there but monitoring and policing of implementation remain a huge concern.

As a result of their extensive training, veterinarians are excellent problem solvers. Therefore increased veterinary presence at plants not only improves hygiene standards, but also speeds up the identification of problem areas and improves disease surveillance.

The presence of a vet at the abattoir also leads to improvements in animal welfare. As the OIE puts pressure on the rest of the world to adhere to stricter animal welfare standards, the need for education and monitoring of this aspect of animal health is increasingly important for abattoirs looking to export their products. As society becomes more conscious of animal sentience, people demand better animal welfare, therefore non-export abattoirs also need to stay abreast of the developments in animal welfare science and educate their staff on correct handling practices in order to remain competitive.

All abattoirs are required to have access to the services of a veterinarian for at least the performance of secondary veterinary meat inspection. The CCS program has shown great success by placing some of the CCS vets in abattoirs, thereby increasing the more permanent involvement of veterinarians in abattoirs within the Western Cape by 350%. These CCS vets have been able to recognise and report back on everyday issues.

We as VPH CCS vets do not seek to “police” abattoirs, we see ourselves as educated observers, and where abattoir managers agree to work with us is where we have made the most progress. The past 11 months have been a great learning curve for all of us, and although we do not gain as much clinical experience as some of our peers, we certainly have a greater impact on the community. We’ve seen the value in what we do and we are proud to have made great improvements in the hygiene and safety of the food that leaves our plants.

This conference was a great opportunity to learn even more about the meat industry and to gain some perspective on the industry’s financial state and technological advances. 

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