

# General Secretary's Report



## **Recording of Contamination**

Hello to you all. I would like to start this report with what the national council believe to be good news. The Meat Hygiene Service has recently introduced a new system of recording incidents of contamination at the point of post mortem inspection. This is most definitely an important step forward in the improvement of meat hygiene, and the Association gives its full support to this scheme. I have written to the Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service, Steve McGrath to this effect and have received assurance that the results will be able to be related to the effectiveness of the FBO's HACCP based system, including ***the cleanliness of the livestock admitted to the premises.*** Following the demise of the much lamented Clean Livestock Policy (lamented by slaughtermen, MHI's and OV's alike) this could prove to be an important step to redressing the problems that we have all encountered with dirty animals being sent to slaughter.

It is important therefore that the results are recorded accurately and consistently, not just in individual plants, but across the board, and I would encourage members to discuss their approach to recording results, not only within individual teams, but, where possible, between different teams as well. The first stages of this new approach will be important in establishing base line figures, upon which further developments, positive or negative, can be measured.

## **Representation at Meetings**

The Association have or will be sending representatives to several different meetings in the recent past/near future, covering the discussions on charging, training and food chain information. With regard to training, two of our main concerns are that the new training will be modular NVQ style and that only some of those modules will be required for an operative to carry out specific tasks. As we understand it, this training will also be "on the job" training. This would mean that unless the trainee is being supervised one hundred percent of the time, then you would effectively have unqualified, inexperienced personnel inspecting food for human consumption. We also have concerns that the assessors themselves need not be qualified in meat inspection.

With regard to the newly introduced Food Chain Information, the general opinion of members is that there is definitely a “dumbing down” process going on. Why else would whoever drafted these sheets want to refer to “hepatopathy, milkspot like lesions” or “joint lesions” rather than specify the pathologies found etc? The general consensus is that this is paving the way for plant inspection assistants or “spotters” in the future.

We are well aware of the FSA's intention to move this direction, seeking to extend the PIA system in poultry first into fattening pigs (within certain parameters), and veal calves, and their intention to seek legislative change at EU level to permit this to happen. If they succeed in this, then surely the sad and dangerous progression of this state of affairs is to extend the thinking into all aspects of meat inspection, along with their desire to move to a “risk based system” of inspection. Most members agree that “risk based” is a simply a pseudonym for “cost cutting”.

### **Contract MHI's**

We are still receiving negative reports about the standard of some of the contracted meat inspectors being employed, with inappropriate incisions being made. I had related to me the thoughts from one butcher that one of his lambs was so badly slashed that the fillets were virtually unsaleable as quality joints, presumably in the further inspection for Cystercercus Ovis. I am confident that an experienced meat hygiene inspector will always have in mind the quality of the product that he is inspecting, and keep in mind that a

well inspected carcase will not show any obvious signs of having been inspected, unless pathologies merit further detailed inspection and rectification work.

### **Segregation of Cattle**

The current system of “streaming” under thirty month cattle, thirty to forty eight month cattle and over forty eight month cattle into their separate classes has caused consternation for FBO's processing all three classes. It was generally believed that once the age for brain stem testing of cattle was raised to forty eight months, then processors would be able to slaughter the younger cattle together, with the thirty to forty eight month cattle identified on line and separated out for vertebral column removal, which is still a requirement. It was also generally believed that all cattle plants were to be able to slaughter cattle of up to forty eight months without having to have a Required Method of Operation in place. This has been quite apparent with the numbers of these cattle being delivered to slaughter at plants that were not previously slaughtering OTM cattle, and are now having to either turn this stock away or make arrangements to have them slaughtered elsewhere. In short, the whole system appears confused and in some aspects, non-sensical, and the sooner that this situation is resolved, the better. With regards to the separation of carcasses and subsequent removal of vertebral column in 30-48 month cattle, surely this is one area where FBO's can demonstrate their willingness to assume responsibility, and that will be

very easy to audit by the competent authorities? If these cattle are of a risk low enough to not merit brain stem testing, surely any risk due to subsequent failure to remove vertebral column from these animals would also be equally miniscule. This would of course have to hand in hand with robust enforcement where failures are identified.

## **The Pennington Report**

The Pennington report into the E-Coli outbreak in South Wales has now been published. That there were failures of the system is without any doubt and we all read with interest to see exactly what failures that his report identified. Can we now expect amendments to the regulations and new instructions to staff at the frontline when we have long suspected that a more rigorous enforcement of the existing controls at poorly performing plants is probably what is required. The AMI has long been concerned about an apparent affinity to a “light touch enforcement regime”, and have expressed this concern many times to the FSA. To the layman, it might well appear to be a contradiction that on the one hand we can expect a tightening of controls in response to this situation, and on the other, the FSA are actively seeking to move to a “risk based” system of control. One of the advantages of utilising an independent system of meat inspection, with experienced meat hygiene inspectors is that it re-enforces consumer confidence in the product that all take so much pride in. Quite plainly, a loss of consumer

confidence would be detrimental to EVERYBODY involved in the industry.

## **Vets United and UNISON**

There has been some considerable anger voiced about the views expressed on the website “vets united” and in particular about their call for vets to join UNISON. Many MHI’s feel that this would be a betrayal, particularly in light of the apparent lack of support for the MHI when strike action seemed to be a distinct possibility. My own views on this are that any employed person should be able to endeavour to protect their rights and if this entails joining a union, whichever union that may be, then so be it. Like it or not, working with contracted vets employed as MHI’s from time to time is the situation we now find ourselves in. As I mentioned at the top of this report, team work is essential to the effective application of the system, and after all, we all wish to have a pleasant and effective working atmosphere. I would advocate the assistance of any CMHI that is not as experienced as ourselves, in much the same way as many of us have in the past mentored newly qualified MHI’s, thus demonstrating the professionalism that is ubiquitous amongst our members. I am confident that this will not go un-noticed by any part of industry, in particular by FBOs’, the vast majority of whom agree that the MHI is valuable part of industry.

Keep up the good work.

Regards,

Ian Robinson