General Secretary's Report

Hello to you all.

First of all an apology; this edition of Meat Hygienist will reach you later than usual and I hold up my hands for this. The reason being that, with Visual Inspection (VO) of pigs due to be in place for the first of June, this is the last edition before that date and I wanted to bring my observations during a visit to one of the major players in the Netherlands where VO is already happening.

In the middle of March, Peter Watson and I were invited to accompany the British Pig Executive (BPEX) together with representatives of British industry and the Food Standards Agency, on a fact finding visit to a VION pig abattoir in Apeldoorn, Netherlands. The plant processes up to 25,000 pigs per week at a line speed of around 585 per hour.

Unfortunately Peter was unable to attend so I went as the sole representative of the Association.

I rather suspected that, knowing about the AMI's reservations, we were invited with a mind seeking to convince us about the virtues of the visual inspection system (VI) of pigs.

However, I determined to make this visit with three criteria;

- To keep an open mind.
- Not to be co-erced by an opinion other than my own
- To ask the questions that had been posed by Council.

Ante-mortem

During the visit it quickly became apparent that for VI to have any chance of working, it is necessary to have an absolute commitment from the senior management. The company set the parameters; critical control points, control points and standard operating procedures and these are agreed with the Competent Authority (in much the same way as the approval process here in the UK). The Competent Authority's role is then one of verification. The Official Veterinarian informed us that if he notices a problem, or the operatives are not following the company rules, then he will seek out the relevant manager and ascertain if they too were aware of the situation, and if so, what are they doing to deal with it? If the situation has not been noticed, or if nothing is being done to rectify the problems, then in the words of the OV 'we really have a problem'.

It was explained that Food Chain Information (FCI) had to be robust; both accurate and relevant, thus providing

information from which decisions could be made as to such things as the order of slaughter of the pigs, staffing levels, adjustment of automated machinery etc.

The management expressed the need/desire for the information supplied on the FCI to be decided at plant level and this then agreed with the Competent Authority. This would include information about feed and feed suppliers, membership of Farm Assurance Schemes and past results/CCIR. It was stated to us that herds that are not from integrated systems, or that do not comply with the FBO's criteria are NOT processed in their plants.

The OV in plant would have the final say as to whether the pigs should be moved away from the default position of visual inspection to a system of traditional inspection and, in making this decision he would take in to consideration the systems of primary production other than in a controlled environment, such as where the pigs are free range (i.e. not kept in controlled environments such as outdoor yards but with free access to fields/woodlands etc.), where there are apparent welfare issues or where Mycobacterium Avium/Hominosuis is evident. This last criterion would be ascertained by blood samples (taken at the point of slaughter) from previous batches of pigs from that particular holding. It was acknowledged that this is a retrospective monitoring system but it was pointed out that over a period of time, a comprehensive picture could be built up that provided adequate information for this to work. This information is fed back to the holdings concerned and the company also offer a service whereby producers can request specific tests done on the samples (at their own expense) as and when directed by the Veterinarian for the holding.

Positive results would mean that the pigs would be subjected to a traditional system of inspection.

In short, where monitoring indicates a 'higher risk', the pigs are subjected to a system of further inspection.

It was noted that the company insist that each and every individual pig is identified via a metal ear tag that is applied shortly before the movement from the holding to the abattoir.

'Casualty' pigs are detained until the end of the kill, dependent on any welfare issues and these are subjected to a system of further inspection.

This would also apply to any pigs identified at ante-mortem inspection as having obvious abnormalities, such as tail bitten pigs, abnormal swellings, large hernias etc.

<u>Post - mortem</u>

During production, an operative is positioned on the line prior to post mortem inspection, whose role is to identify and deal with pleurisy/peritonitis. I questioned this with the management in the Q and A session at the end of the visit, with particular reference as to whether or not the operative was qualified to be making this kind of decision. I was informed that this had been agreed at a 'local' level with the OV. I further enquired as to whether this agreement extended to removing more than just simple pleurisy, for

example, anything with abscess or signs of sepsis and was informed that this was in the affirmative.

Interestingly, contamination was not dealt with on the moving line but routinely directed to the static detained rail where it could be dealt with in an unhurried manner in the most hygienic way possible. This is a point that here in the UK we should most definitely consider taking on board.

The Official Auxiliaries (as MHI's are recognised in the Netherlands) did not wear or use knives routinely at the post mortem inspection points (nor did they even wear aprons) but were armed with a food safe pencil with which they would identify any pigs to be detained and also to give an indication of the abnormality/abnormalities identified. Sub – maxillary lymph nodes are NOT routinely incised.

I did notice that the fatter pigs made it a little more difficult to see the iliac lymph nodes and the AO's did use their hands to facilitate this inspection, or to see inside the carcase as and when necessary. It is accepted by plant management that a minimal amount of handling is necessary for adequate inspection of the pigs. To facilitate the inspection of the back of the pigs, highly polished stainless steel mirrors were used. I stated my concerns that mirrors can be prone to fogging or getting 'water stained' to the point where they become practically unworkable. It was acknowledged that fogging was a problem in the early days but that if the one specific detergent is used, then this is negated. I was further informed that if the mirrors should become stained (or dirty) to the point where the AO's felt it necessary to stop the line, the cost of the loss of production would ensure that management would rectify the situation pretty sharply and take steps to ensure that it didn't happen again.

If a carcase needed to be detained, and, if the AO's considered it to be necessary, the operative at the end of the offal line would bag up the red offals, including the spleen, and these would then accompany the detained carcase to the detained rail. The green offals could also be detained in the same manner upon request from the AO's.

The AO inspecting the red offals would do so in a visual only manner (from a seated position) and would have no part in any rectification of abnormalities. This was left to the aforementioned operative at the end of the red offal line. The AO would record any abnormalities spotted on an automated system, as would the OA's at the carcase inspection point.

It was explained to us that if there are any issues with the AO's methods/decisions etc. that the management would wish to see addressed then they would speak in the first instance with the OV, who will then hold the relevant discussions with the OA's behind closed doors. In a similar manner, the AO's would not converse with, advise or direct the operatives but would instead deal directly with plant management or talk to the OV.

<u>Does Visual Inspection Work?</u>

I guess that the only true 'evidence' is the carcase compliance monitoring in the chillers. The plant management informed us that this was set at a maximum of 2%,

and included such non compliances as toe nails not being fully removed and the odd touch of rail grease being apparent. If this level is exceeded, it is incumbent on the FBO to explain to the Competent Authority how/where things have gone wrong and what is being done to rectify the situation.

The figures shown to us indicated a macro scopic non-compliance rate of 1.9%, thus indicating that the system was indeed working.

When the company first trialled the VO system of inspection, the biggest apparent issue seemed to be one of trust in the system, or rather a lack of it. The AO's would track detained carcases to the detained rail to ensure that the correct pig was in fact the one detained. The company has addressed this issue by including transponders on the gambrels to ensure that correlation is absolute and the abattoir manager informed us that, after the first few days of doing this, the AO's were satisfied that all was well in this respect.

Talking to the AO's themselves, they acknowledged that there was an initial resistance to the new system, but now it had been accepted and they felt that they had more time to inspect the pigs and to accurately record any conditions observed.

It has led to a reduction in the numbers of staff on the inspection team, in this particular plant from ten down to six and it was acknowledged to me that this is one of the main attractions of this system to the British industry. No surprises there!!!

So am I convinced that Visual Inspection is the way to go? Not entirely.

I have reservations about the operatives removing pathologies before the post-mortem inspection point, no matter how minor they may be. Being a meat inspector myself I don't really see how anybody might expect me to say otherwise. If, however, a similar system to the one observed is adopted here in the UK then I sincerely hope that this practice would not be extended beyond simple chronic pleurisy/peritonitis. If any MHI felt unable to make an informed judgement on any carcase due to removal of pathology or a lack of information then I would advise them to detain the carcase and offals for the OV in plant to make that decision.

Hygiene at both carcase rectification points and the offal rectification point is of paramount importance and I would suggest that at least a three knife technique is necessary.

As it stands in the UK there is no requirement for routine sampling for Mycobacterium in pigs, and I believe our membership would feel happier if the UK adopted the monitoring system used in the plant visited. As we heard at Seminar, a similar testing regime is also in place in Germany.

One question in particular that I was asked to pose by council was this; if the sub – maxillary lymph nodes are considered to be so contaminated that they are too dangerous to be subjected to incisions by the MHI, at what point in the production process are they removed? The answer that I received was that the heads are removed in their entirety at this particular plant and sent out to a third party for

processing. Thus this was an issue for them to address.

If this situation arises in the UK I would suggest that it is one that should be closely monitored during cutting inspections/audits. One for the UAV MHI's perhaps?

In addition;

Talking to the British industry representatives on this visit it would appear that one of the biggest 'grievances' is the sometimes 'less than accurate' recording of rejection conditions. I was informed that in some cases that MHI's are recording both kidneys being rejected as two separate rejections, thus leading to a double recording, and apparently, the same thing happens with the lungs. If this is what is happening then surely this should be easy enough to sort out amongst ourselves? Just record the one 'condition'??!!

The management of the VION plant confirmed this had previously been a problem, during discussion through the course of the day, going on to state that accurate CCIR is 'essential' for their purpose.

The future; my thoughts

There is no doubt that pig inspection as we have known it is going to change, and that this is going to bring with it a new set of challenges. Not least is the necessity for excellent communications within the inspection teams themselves.

Vigilance on both the offal and carcase inspection points remains as important as it ever was and if the MHI feels the need to detain a carcase for a more thorough inspection, they must be able to do so without fear of rebuke. An initial increase in the amount of detained pigs was found to be the case in the Netherlands when the system was first introduced, but this got progressively lower with the passing of time. Part of the reason for this was the accurate recording of rejection conditions, so the MHI will have a fundamental role to play in this respect. The more accurate the information, the better able the producer is able to do something to rectify the situation and as a consequence, over time, the better the standard of the pigs presented for slaughter, thus closing the loop.

It's going to be different, and I hope our concerns are heard and recognised but MHI's are adaptable folk and will be able to rise to the challenge of what lies ahead

Keep up the good work.

Regards,

Ian Robinson