Animal welfare impacts of badger culling

Dear editor,

We are writing to express our extreme concern following the recent media coverage1 relating to the methodology being used by contractors to kill badgers under licence, as part of the Government’s policy to control bovine tuberculosis in cattle. Badger culling relates to the shooting of badgers that have been captured in live traps. Covert video footage from Cumbria appears to show a trapped badger being shot with a firearm at close range, following animal welfare Strategy2. The contractor clearly observes the animal during this time, but makes no attempt to expel the dead badger and prevent further suffering, as required by the current Natural England Best Practice Guide, which states “Immediately after shooting, the carcass should be checked to ensure it is dead, and if there is any doubt, a second shot must be taken as soon as possible.”

The conversation between the contractor and his companion also suggests they did not intend to badger the site at the shooting, again, in our view, breaching the best practice guide.

While the footage only relates to the experience of a single badger, contractors should have noticed a training, competence and behaviour of contractors in relation to both badger welfare and biosecurity. This adds to existing concerns relating to the humaneness of “controlled shooting” and trapping free-roaming badgers with efficacy, which continues to be a permitted method under licence, in spite of the reservations expressed by both the Government’s own independent expert Panel in its 2014 report, and the BVA itself, which concluded, in 2015, that it “can no longer support the continued use of controlled shooting as part of the badger control policy”. Contractors must continue to support the issuing of licences that permit the method.

The BVA has consistently indicated its support for what it calls the “controlled shooting” method of trapping and shooting, but has thus far failed to provide comprehensive and robust evidence for its humaneness.

During 2017, almost 20,000 badgers were killed under licence across 19 council zones – around 60 per cent of which were killed by controlled shooting. The remainder were trapped and shot: Natural England reported its monitors observed just 74 (slightly more than 0.6 per cent) of the controlled shooting events for accuracy and humaneness. No information has been provided on the extent to which trapping and shooting activities were monitored. This raises serious concerns about the extent of suffering that might be experienced by very large numbers of animals, for which contractors are not trained to manage.

If contractors reach the maximum culling targets set by Natural England for 2018, as many as 41,000 additional badgers could be killed. The extent to which these animals will suffer is once again being left in the hands of contractors, with woeful inadequate oversight, and in the face of anecdotal evidence of breaches of best practice guidance. This situation is clearly unacceptable from an animal welfare perspective and it is our view that by endorsing the policy, the BVA is contradicting the principles contained within its own Animal Welfare Strategy.

We therefore urge the BVA to withdraw its support for any further licenced badger culling, and the RVCS to make it clear that any veterinarian who provides support for culling activities that result in unnecessary and avoidable animal suffering should face disciplinary proceedings. In our view, the veterinary profession has no business supporting this licenced mass killing with all its inherent negative welfare and biosecurity implications, and for which the disease control benefits are, at best, extremely uncertain.

We believe the continued support for the kills by veterinary bodies in the face of peer evidence for its efficacy the past few days and enjoy actually doing this, but rather that we continue in this face of potential animal suffering on a large scale undermines its reputation.

We stand ready to discuss these issues in more detail.

Yours faithfully,

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FIODA DALELL, RVN, BSc(Hons), Whitewell, MRCVS
BROWNIE EASTWOOD, BSc(Hons), CertPST, Whitewell, MRCVS

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BVA's reply to letter

Dear editor,

The BVA supports a comprehensive approach to tackling BTB that should include control measures in cattle alongside simultaneous and coordinated measures in badgers, other wildlife and susceptible farmed species.

Our policy on BTV control was developed through our committee structures with input from members, and was signed off by the BVA council. We are clear that BTV control and eradication strategy must be based on the application of sound scientific research and veterinary epidemiology, and that the methods used in badger control areas must be effective.

We have not shed away from challenging practice in the past, as evidenced by our withdrawal of support for the controlled shooting policy in 2002. More recently, we wrote to Natural England to express concerns for the welfare of badgers trapped in cages for long periods during the course of their BTV testing. It would not be appropriate to comment in detail on the recent badger cull video, as the footage is grainy, and it is a matter for Natural England to investigate any concerns.

Finally, the suggestion in this letter that the RVCS should erect disciplinary proceedings on any veterinarian supporting culling activities could set a dangerous precedent and is particularly unwarranted at a time when veterinary bodies are prioritising support and employee well-being across the profession.

We have met with members of BVA-FoRB on this issue in the past and would be happy to do so again. This is a clearly an emotive and difficult issue, but we believe it is essential to use all the tools in the tool box to curb the spread of this devastating disease. Yours faithfully,

John FISCHICK, MA, VSA, DCHP, DREPVRDB, BVA senior vice-president.

Fertility tests in rams will feature in part 2

Dear editor,

Regarding G Ramsey Hew’s letter (1 October issue) about my article (‘Preparing rams for mating season’, 10 September issue), I would like to agree with him on the importance of fertility examination of rams, including manual palpation of the reproductive tract and semen collection, is an essential part of ram preparation for the breeding season.

Therefore, I have dedicated the whole of part 2 of my article to it, which I hope fully to be going published imminently.

JENNY HULL, BVM, MRCVS

Black Sheep Farm Health Ltd

Unit A, Rise Bury Industrial Estate

Coomet View, Rothbury

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RVCS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons

Question: What is the cost of a brand name drug compared to a generic drug? The cost of a brand name drug can be three times, or more, the price of a generic drug.

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