THE NEED TO PROHIBIT
THE VEAL CRATE SYSTEM

DEFECTS OF THE VEAL CRATE SYSTEM

Essential characteristics

1. The veal crate system is generally understood to have two essential characteristics:
   a) the calves are kept in a solid-sided crate made of wood, which is so narrow that the calf cannot even turn round from the age of about two weeks; and
   b) in order to keep the flesh pale, the calf is fed an extremely unhealthy diet deficient in iron and roughage; indeed many crated calves are given no solid food at all.

Principal criticisms of the veal crate system

2. In 1995 the European Union’s (EU) Scientific Veterinary Committee (SVC) published a major Report on the Welfare of Calves. The report is a detailed review of the scientific literature in this field. The report is unequivocal in its criticism of the veal crate system. It concludes that the welfare of calves kept in crates is “very poor” and that the diet which is commonplace in the veal crate system (a diet deficient in roughage and iron) can lead to “serious health problems” for the calves. Moreover, Professor John Webster (Professor of Animal Husbandry and Head of the Veterinary School at the University of Bristol and one of the UK’s leading experts on dairy cattle) has stated that the veal crate system is “one of the most bizarre and, in my opinion, unequivocally cruel forms of livestock production”.

Lack of space

3. Veal crates vary in design. Some crates totally box the calf in. Others are open at the rear and, to prevent the calf escaping, it is tethered or yoked to the crate by a metal neck chain.

4. Whichever version of the crate is used, the net result is that the calf cannot turn round. Moreover, as the calf grows bigger, it cannot groom itself properly, lie down with its legs in a comfortable stretched-out position, or even stand up and lie down without difficulty. All these problems will be exacerbated when the calf is tethered to the crate. The SVC Report pointed out that calves can become tangled in their tethers and injured.
5. The fact that a young animal needs exercise is recognised by the SVC which stated that research shows that exercise is necessary for normal bone and muscle development. The SVC added that:

“If calves cannot move their limbs sufficiently they are likely to be severely distressed” (page 23 of SVC Report).

6. In its Conclusions the SVC Report emphasised that:

“Every calf should be able to groom itself properly, turn around, stand up and lie down normally and lie with its legs stretched out if it wishes to do so” (Conclusion 14).

As the calf grows bigger none of these activities are possible in the veal crate.

7. The SVC Report added that after six months in an individual pen, calves may have severe problems in walking because of lack of exercise. The Report stated:

“Trunkfield et al (1991) reported that some calves kept in individual pens until 6 months of age had difficulty in walking when released from the pens to go to slaughter, and this fact is often reported in the industry” (page 59 of the SVC Report).

**Need for social contact**

8. Calves kept in crates are deprived of any normal social contact with other calves. The SVC Report emphasised that social contacts are of great importance to the calf:

“Calves are very social animals interacting frequently with other calves after one week of age and developing normal social behaviour only if they can interact freely with other calves” (Conclusion 13).

**Need for bedding**

9. Calves kept in crates are given no straw or other bedding material. The reason for this is that if the calves ate the straw their flesh might deepen in colour, whereas many consumers want ‘white veal’.

10. Veal crates always have slatted floors to allow faeces and urine to drain away. These slats frequently become slippery and this leads to calves encountering difficulties in lying down and standing up. The SVC Report added that lameness, and claw and leg disorders may be caused by hard and slippery floors (page 62).

11. The SVC recommended that calves be supplied with appropriate bedding, for example straw (Conclusion 18).
**SVC Conclusions on the veal crate**

12. The SVC concluded that the welfare of calves kept in veal crates is very poor:

   “The welfare of calves is very poor when they are kept in small individual pens with insufficient room for comfortable lying, no direct social contact and no bedding or other material to manipulate” (Conclusion 10).

13. Regarding tethering, the SVC stated that:

   “Tethering always causes problems for calves ... Individually housed calves should not be tethered” (Conclusion 11).

14. The SVC made it clear that group-housing is the preferred system:

   “In order to provide an environment which is adequate for exercise, exploration and free social interaction, calves should be kept in groups” (Conclusion 15).

15. Indeed the SVC went even further, saying that:

   “The best conditions for rearing young calves involve leaving the calf with the mother in a circumstance where the calf can suckle and can subsequently graze and interact with other calves” (Conclusion 4).

**Incidence of disease**

16. Some supporters of the continued use of the veal crate have sought to argue that the incidence of certain diseases is lower among crated calves. We do not believe that this is the case. Indeed Professor John Webster has said that:

   “The incidence of infectious disease [in veal crate units] is high and often kept under control only by liberal and repeated administration of antibiotics” (In “Improved husbandry systems for calves” by Webster J., Saville C. and Welchman D., 1985).

17. Moreover, Professor Donald Broom, Professor of Animal Welfare at the University of Cambridge, has stated that, in general, calves kept in crates have to be given extra medication to ensure that they are going to survive.

18. The SVC concluded that good husbandry “is needed to minimise disease in group housing conditions but results that are as good as those from individual housing can be obtained” (Conclusion 12).
Unhealthy diet

19. In natural conditions, from about two weeks of age, calves would begin to eat grass and the rumination process would start. In order to achieve the ‘white veal’ prized by continental consumers, many of the calves kept in the veal crate system are never given solid food at all. They are fed on a liquid milk replacer - a mixture of milk, tallow and vegetable fats and other types of proteins from cereal, vegetable or fish sources. This is mixed with water.

20. In his paper referred to earlier, Professor John Webster condemned this all-liquid diet, stating that “it completely distorts the normal development of the rumen” (the calf’s stomach system). In a desperate attempt to get solid food the calves often lick the parts of their bodies they can reach and swallow their own hair. Hair balls then accumulate in the rumen and can cause a mechanical obstruction to digestion.

21. The SVC pointed out that calves “fed on a milk diet with no solid feed [the diet given to most crated calves] would die before adulthood so it is clear that such a diet is not sufficient for healthy growth” (page 23). In other words, crated calves are being fed a lethal diet which would eventually kill them if they were not slaughtered first.

22. In a further attempt to keep the flesh pale, the iron content of the calves’ feed is kept low. Low iron levels are associated with reduced fitness, vulnerability to disease and increased susceptibility to stress. Newborn calves have limited iron resources and the iron content of milk itself is low. In natural conditions calves would start to obtain iron from grasses or other solid food.

23. The SVC concluded that calves which are given a diet which is deficient in iron and, for calves older than four weeks, deficient in roughage (i.e. the diet which is commonplace in the veal crate system):

“can have serious health problems, can show serious abnormalities of behaviour, and can have substantial abnormalities in gut development” (Conclusion 20).

RECOMMENDATION AS TO IMPROVEMENTS IN CALF HUSBANDRY

24. Compassion in World Farming believes that:

a) the use of the veal crate should be prohibited and that calves should be housed in groups (except where sick animals need to be isolated) or left with their mother.

b) all calves should be given a sufficient quantity of solid food (i.e. palatable and digestible long fibre roughage) and dietary iron to maintain good health.
**Recommendations as to a healthier diet**

**Solid feed**

25. The SVC recommended that “every calf should be fed fermentable material, appropriate in quality and sufficient in quantity to maintain the microbial flora of the gut and sufficient fibre to stimulate the development of villi in the rumen. Roughage, in which half of the fibre should be at least 10 mm. in length, should be fed to calves. They should receive a minimum of 100g. of roughage per day from 2 to 15 weeks of age, increasing to 250g. per day from 15 to 26 weeks of age, but it would be better if these amounts were doubled” (Conclusion 23) (our underlining).

26. It is important that part (ideally, all) of the diet should consist of long fibre. Professor John Webster of the University of Bristol has stressed the importance of long fibre. Long fibre is necessary to induce rumination. Calves have both a physiological and behavioural need to ruminate. Rumination produces substances in the gut which act to reduce the effect of the acidity resulting from drinking large quantities of quickly-digested milk. Professor Webster has said that feeding long fibre also appears to meet a behavioural need as rumination reduces the level of stereotypies in calves (personal communication).

27. Le Neindre is one of many experts who declare that “ingestion of fibre is important for the welfare status of calves” (Le Neindre, 1993). He explains why this is so: “Calves should receive solid feed because it enriches the environment, increases feeding time and allows a much longer ruminating time”.

28. Ingestion of the right sort of solid food not only avoids damage to the rumen but can also improve calf health. Webster writes “When calves are given just enough of the sort of solid food necessary to normalise rumen development, enteric diseases can be reduced to the low level considered acceptable in normal calf-rearing units. Furthermore, since enteritis triples the risk that calves will subsequently contract pneumonia, respiratory infections were normalised as well” (Webster, 1995).

**Dietary iron**

29. A normal concentration of haemoglobin in the blood is 7 millimols per litre (mmol/litre) and this should be the minimum level required for calves. A level lower than this will deprive calves of the amount of dietary iron they require for normal physiological development and a positive state of health and well-being.

**ECONOMICS**

30. In their statement of 24 January 1996, the European Commission said that banning veal crates “would have a negligible effect on the costs of calf rearing”. They stated that changing from individual pens to group housing would lead to an increase in costs of about 1.1%.
EUROPEAN UNION DIRECTIVE

31. The EU Directive 97/2/EC prohibits, as from 31 December 2006, the use of the veal crate throughout the EU. Specifically, the Directive provides that after the age of 8 weeks calves must be kept in groups (except where a veterinarian has certified that a calf’s health or behaviour requires it to be isolated in order to receive treatment). Even where, before the age of 8 weeks (or where a veterinarian has certified as indicated above), a calf is confined in an individual pen, the pen must be wide enough for the calf to turn round; it cannot be a veal crate, i.e. a crate or stall so narrow that the calf cannot turn round. The wording that the Directive uses to provide for the crate or stall to be wide enough for the calf to turn round is that “The width of any individual pen for a calf shall be at least equal to the height of the calf at the withers, measured in the standing position, and the length shall be at least equal to the body length of the calf, measured from the tip of the nose to the caudal edge of the tuber ischii (pin bone), multiplied by 1.1”. It must be stressed again that even such a pen which allows the calf to turn round cannot be used after the age of 8 weeks; from that age the calves must be group housed (except where a veterinarian certifies as indicated above).

32. The EU Directive also prohibits the tethering of calves.

33. As regards diet, the EU Directive provides that “All calves shall be provided with an appropriate diet adapted to their age, weight and behavioural and physiological needs, to promote good health and welfare”. The Directive goes on to provide that calves’ food “shall contain sufficient iron to ensure an average blood haemoglobin level of at least 4.5 mmol/litre and a minimum daily ration of fibrous food shall be provided for each calf over two weeks old, the quantity being raised from 50g. to 250g. per day for calves from eight to twenty weeks old”. Whilst we believe this level of blood haemoglobin and this quantity of fibrous food to be far too low, they nonetheless represent a significant improvement on the conditions which are commonplace in the veal crate system where calves often receive little or no fibrous food and may have a much lower level of blood haemoglobin.

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REFERENCES


