

THE QUESTION OF STUNNING By Abdul Hamid Evans **A short time ago, my attitude towards stunning was, perhaps like many other people, somewhat indifferent. I regarded it as something that was, although undesirable, perhaps a necessary element in the modern process of meat production, part of the industrialisation process. That was until I started to actually look into the matter.**

In summary, the common methods of stunning used in the meat industry are non-reversible stunning with a penetrative bolt to the head or, reversible stunning with a 'captive bolt' or mushroom head bolt to the head. For poultry, the most common method involves the immersion of the head of the bird in an electrical bath to induce stunning, prior to cutting the throat. The basic assumption is this: stunning the animal prior to cutting the throat is less painful for the animal and, of lesser concern, is safer and more acceptable for the human beings involved in both the slaughter and consumption of the animals.

History Stunning, as far as we can uncover, was initially started in England in the early 20th century by a group known as the CJA, the Council for Justice to Animals. In 1928, the CJA joined forces with the Humane Slaughter Association, and formed the, nation-wide HSA. The association's first major reform was to replace the pole-axe with a mechanically operated 'humane' stunner. Demonstrations were given to slaughtermen all over the country and hundreds of humane stunners were distributed free of charge. Initially the meat trade objected, fearing that the meat might be contaminated, although this suspicion was overcome when the HSA petitioned doctors for their support. In the late 1920s, the association carried out an eight month demonstration of the humane stunner at an Islington slaughterhouse. As a result of the association's work, humane stunners were adopted by 28 London boroughs and later by 494 other local authorities. The natural processes of improvement and adaptation have led to the current use of stunning methods outlined earlier, and are in use in many countries all over the world.

A Closer Look On examination, the notion that it is better for the animal to die while unconscious is revealed to be unfounded; indeed, one may suspect that it is an assumption based on what some people may prefer for themselves - to drift quietly into endless sleep. However, this is certainly not the case for the Muslims; either for themselves or for the purposes of ritual slaughter as required by Shari'ah. The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, has said, *"Allah has prescribed proficiency in all things; so if you kill, kill well and if you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each one of you sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters."* In the matter of stunning, as in so many other issues today, it appears that we have actually adopted an alien value system and attempted to make it our own in an effort to be more acceptable. We do not need instructions in animal welfare from others; we need instead to follow the guidelines that we already have. Allah says in the Qur'an, *"There is not an animal on the earth nor a bird that flies, but that they form communities like you."* This implies that the animals in our care must be allowed to live out their full animal natures and social behaviour patterns, and not simply be reduced to components of a meat production process. The animals for slaughter must be well fed and watered, must not see the knife, nor the signs of previously slaughtered animals. The slaughterman should face the qiblah it, and must utter the words,

Bismillah Allahu Akbar as he slaughters. These words are an important confirmation that the animal is being killed in the name of Allah, but the words are not just for us; the animal has the right to know that it has been slaughtered in the name of Allah. **A Question of Pain** The point of the well-sharpened knife is to reduce pain. The assumption that a stunned animal feels less pain has effectively been disproved as long ago as 1978 by the study carried by Dr William Schulze and Dr Hazim at the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Hanover in Germany. Electrodes were implanted into the brains of selected calves and sheep, and the animals allowed to recover. Some animals were stunned by captive bolt prior to slaughter, and others were slaughtered according to Shari'ah by swift deep incision with a sharp knife, cutting the jugular veins, carotid arteries, trachea and oesophagus. EEG and ECG equipment monitored the brain and heart activity of the animals. After Halal slaughter:

- For three seconds after the incision, the EEG registered no change, and therefore no pain.
- For the following three seconds, the EEG registered the patterns of deep sleep, and thereafter dropped to zero activity.
- As the EEG dropped to zero, the heart still beat vigorously, and the reflex action of the central nervous system caused the body to convulse, thereby driving out the maximum amount of blood from the body.

After captive bolt stunning:

- 1.The animals appeared unconscious after stunning.
- 2.EEG showed severe pain and distress immediately upon stunning.
- 3.Zero level on EEG was only reached after the bloodletting cut.
- 4.Their hearts stopped beating sooner, resulting in the retention of more blood in the meat.

The Question of Safety From the animal welfare point of view, there is no real case for stunning; it is not better for the animal, it is actually worse. From the safety aspect, the only convenience is afforded to the slaughterman, as the animal kicks less vigorously if stunned. For the safety of the consumer, stunning has clearly become an issue as a result of Mad Cow Disease or BSE. The use of penetrative bolt stunning results in two possible channels of contamination from brain and central nervous system tissue. The force behind the penetrative bolt can result in brain matter being scattered throughout the blood stream and into the meat of the animal, thereby creating the risk of BSE contamination. Given that the stunned animal retains more blood than the Halal slaughtered one, this risk is increased. The other risk is that brain matter can be spread outside - a kind of blow-back from the stun gun - and cause contamination in the slaughterhouse environment. In both cases, it seems clear that there is distinct cause to question the safety of the stunning process.

Not Producers This whole issue of stunning raises the concern that for the most part, the production of Halal meat is in the hands of non-Muslim companies in non-Muslim countries. We consume, but do not produce. Hence we have to negotiate the importance of Halal slaughter to people whose concerns - while they may overlap with our own - are not the same. Of the 12 major Halal food exporting countries in the world,

(Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom: and the USA), none are under Muslim authority. While the meat that they produce is usually of the highest quality, Halal is for them a purely economic issue; it is about access to a market of 4 billion people. Fortunately, the Halal certificate-issuing authorities are beginning to recognise the wider implications of matters such as stunning. It is reassuring to note that the new Malaysian Standard for Halal, MS1500:2004 states that stunning is 'not recommended'. But this is just a step. However, one would hope that they begin to realise the potential power of the Halal standard that is in their hands. The passive consumer is helpless. One need only examine the astounding obesity statistics emerging from the western world to recognise the extent of this helplessness. Far from being able to discriminate, the passive consumer cannot even stop. However, the active and informed consumer has power; the key is in learning how to exercise it. Clearly, in terms of both animal welfare and consumer safety, the Halal process is far superior to any other method. The Muslim authorities must start to recognise that they have both the responsibility and the power to set the Halal standards for the major Halal meat producers. What we would all like to see is a collective effort by the various certification authorities around the world to set Global Halal Standards and have them put into practice. The certification authorities in the meat producing countries are not in any position to take the lead in this; that must come from the Muslim-majority consumer countries. The major seals of Halal food importation and consumption are the Middle East and Asian regions, and the leadership in this matter must come from them. Rather than worrying about protecting the integrity or market position of their respective domestic Halal certification, it is time that they took a wider view - and frankly a more responsible role - in this respect. Active consumers have power by collective action; they can change the dynamics of the market. A common Halal Standard will not only protect the Muslim consumers, it will go a long way towards demonstrating that the Halal method of slaughter is superior to any other, and will thus begin to protect everyone else. *"Oh Mankind! Eat from the earth that which is Halal and tayyib (lawful and wholesome)"* The benefit is, after all, for everyone; the responsibility for putting it in place is ours. **Courtesy of THE HALAL JOURNAL - Malaysia. Issue: March/April, 2005**