

Chapter 15. Stockmanship



Many of the welfare problems experienced by pigs can be overcome by good stockmanship. Many have argued that good stockmanship is the key to providing good welfare.

When asked, an experienced stockperson will say things like 'good stockmanship is about understanding their pigs', 'I know that welfare is good by looking at my pigs', 'a good stockperson is constantly checking that everything is all right' and 'it takes a life time to learn'.

In other words, good stockmanship includes:

- Empathy
- Knowledge and experience
- Good observation skills
- Conscientiousness

Good stockpersons will have a strong empathy with their pigs. They will have the willingness and patience to treat the animals as individuals, attending to their needs, as they require it. Good stockpersons will have a sound basic knowledge of the pigs and their requirements. They will be able to recognise signs of ill health and poor welfare and also signs of good welfare including health. Good observation skills are therefore essential. Pigs, as with all livestock, must be inspected regularly. Good stockpersons will develop a regular and consistent routine for checking their pigs. With

keen senses, they will note any change in the look, sound, smell or 'feel' of the system.

During inspection, sick, injured or dead pigs should be removed promptly. Ailing pigs should be segregated and treated or, if necessary, humanely killed without delay. Veterinary advice must always be sought and acted upon whenever disease is suspected.

A good stockperson is conscientious and is able to identify and prioritise the essential tasks required for

good husbandry. In many situations, the importance of the stockperson as a 'welfare worker' is undervalued.

Stockpersons must be aware of the *Five Freedoms* (see page 6). Although most persons caring for animals are aware of the needs for a good diet, shelter and good health, the freedom to perform natural behaviour and the freedom from fear and distress can too easily be overlooked.

There has been a great deal of research into the personality types that make a good stockperson. Should they be introverted or extroverted? Some farmers believe that women often make better, more sensitive stockpeople (though there are clearly also many excellent men in the industry). Whatever the influence of sex or personality type, the attitudes of stockpeople are crucial. According to the website of the **Animal Welfare Science Centre (AWSC)** in Australia:

'The behaviour of a stockperson towards their animals is largely influenced by the attitudes of the stockperson. These attitudes and consequent behaviours predominantly affect the animals' fear of humans which, in turn, affects the animals' performance and welfare'

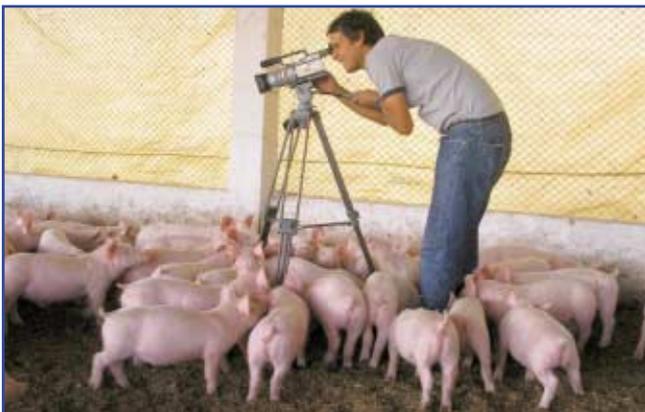
The AWSC has conducted considerable research into the effects of training programmes designed to improve the attitudes of stockpeople and their

understanding of pig behaviour, especially fear responses to people (Coleman *et al*, 1999). These training programmes changed attitudes, reduced the fearfulness of pigs and improved productivity. They also increased the likelihood of stockpeople staying in post – presumably improving attitudes to animals increases job satisfaction.

Scientists at the centre have now produced a multimedia training package called *Prohand* for general publication. They found that changes to attitude and behaviour following attendance at the training sessions improved reproductive performance amongst the pigs in their care by 7% (AWSC, undated).

Handling pigs

Human interaction can have a profound effect on the welfare of pigs. Pigs are naturally fearful of humans and may liken them to potential predators. Fear can have a large motivational and emotional effect on pigs that can lead to stress. It is therefore important to reduce this fear response as much as possible. This can be done by maximising the number of positive interactions and minimising the number of negative interactions. Positive interactions include gentle handling and calm talking. Negative interactions include rough handling and shouting.



Piglets will be at ease with a good stockman. To be at ease with strangers is clear evidence of much good treatment by people

The most common interaction between humans and pigs occurs when they are moved. Pigs are highly intelligent and inquisitive animals and can be quite reluctant to enter unfamiliar areas, particularly if they are not used to being moved. In such a case they will take time to investigate new surroundings, mainly by using their acute sense of smell.

Hearing is also acute in pigs, whereas eyesight is relatively poor. It is therefore a good idea to talk to pigs to let them know of your presence and allow them to get used to your voice. Encouraging tones can be used when moving pigs to let them know exactly where you are and prevent them from having to turn around to look. Pigs will also communicate with each other while being moved with a low grunt. This is contrast to the 'woof' emitted by a startled pig or the high-pitched 'squeal' of a distressed pig.

The movement of pigs should be done with the aid of a pig board to prevent them trying to escape back from where they came. Pigs should be allowed to progress at their own speed. The aim should be to achieve a steady flow. Any attempt to push pigs too quickly may result in them becoming disturbed, stressed and resistant to further forward progress.

Pigs will move most easily along an uncluttered passageway, where there is the minimum distraction. Provide sufficient encouragement from behind or from the side to keep the pigs moving forward. Unusual items such as drain covers or gaps in the floor surface will slow down the normal flow of pigs. A thin layer of straw can be used to cover any gaps and changes in the floor surface.

The skills of the stockperson that are called upon will vary greatly depending on the system used. The welfare of pigs can be safeguarded and their behavioural needs met under a variety of management systems. The system, herd size and stocking rate of pigs kept at any one time, should depend on the suitability of the conditions and the skills of the stockperson. The level of skill will depend on the amount of experience that the stockperson has had but the benefits of training and education should not be overlooked. This is particularly true for the carrying out of health care procedures such as the correct use and storage of medicines. Advice in these matters should always be sought from a veterinary surgeon.

Stockpeople need sound training in the natural behaviour of pigs. They should also be taught to recognise abnormal behaviours which are likely to indicate poor welfare. According to Professor Ingvar Ekesbo, a leading Swedish pig welfare expert, (private communication) it is common for stockpeople to become used to stereotypic behaviours common in intensive farms. They can come to see these as normal, without realising that they are a response to a situation that isn't meeting the needs of the animal.



The farrowing crate cannot provide for the needs of the sow, but a good stockperson can make her life better



Wallows and well-bedded shelters enable the sows to make themselves comfortable. Good stockmanship in extensive systems is partly about giving the sows control over their own environment

Summary

It is widely recognised that stockmanship is a key factor in good welfare. Good stockpeople:

- are conscientious
- are observant
- have a natural empathy with their animals
- learn to identify problems quickly and intuitively with knowledge and experience

While no-one can entirely overcome welfare problems inherent in systems, such as close confinement housing for sows, good stockpeople

can still make things better by attention to detail and spending time building up relationships with their animals.

The key role for stockmanship is in ensuring that systems with high welfare potential achieve that potential. Welfare will be poor in any system if stockmanship is lacking.

Investment in the training of stockpeople, including a grounding in the principles of animal behaviour and welfare, are essential to achieve good animal health, welfare and production.