

AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia

(Formerly Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia)

June 2007



Caution - The AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia (formerly the 2000 Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia) have been widely misinterpreted. Please note the following:

- The guidelines are in no way intended to be used for human lethal injection.
- The application of a barbiturate, paralyzing agent, and potassium chloride delivered in separate syringes or stages (the common method used for human lethal injection) is not cited in the report.
- The report never mentions pancuronium bromide or Pavulon, the paralyzing agent used in human lethal injection.

and pithing. When properly used by skilled personnel with well-maintained equipment, physical methods of euthanasia may result in less fear and anxiety and be more rapid, painless, humane, and practical than other forms of euthanasia. Exsanguination, stunning, and pithing are not recommended as a sole means of euthanasia, but should be considered adjuncts to other agents or methods.

Some consider physical methods of euthanasia aesthetically displeasing. There are occasions, however, when what is perceived as aesthetic and what is most humane are in conflict. Physical methods may be the most appropriate method for euthanasia and rapid relief of pain and suffering in certain situations. Personnel performing physical methods of euthanasia must be well trained and monitored for each type of physical technique performed. That person must also be sensitive to the aesthetic implications of the method and inform onlookers about what they should expect when possible.

Since most physical methods involve trauma, there is inherent risk for animals and humans. Extreme care and caution should be used. Skill and experience of personnel is essential. If the method is not performed correctly, animals and personnel may be injured. Inexperienced persons should be trained by experienced persons and should practice on carcasses or anesthetized animals to be euthanatized until they are proficient in performing the method properly and humanely. When done appropriately, the panel considered most physical methods conditionally acceptable for euthanasia.

PENETRATING CAPTIVE BOLT

A penetrating captive bolt is used for euthanasia of ruminants, horses, swine, laboratory rabbits, and dogs.¹⁰⁸ Its mode of action is concussion and trauma to the cerebral hemisphere and brainstem.^{109,110} Captive bolt guns are powered by gunpowder or compressed air and must provide sufficient energy to penetrate the skull of the species on which they are being used.¹⁰⁹ Adequate restraint is important to ensure proper placement of the captive bolt. A cerebral hemisphere and the brainstem must be sufficiently disrupted by the projectile to induce sudden loss of consciousness and subsequent death. Accurate placement of captive bolts for various species has been described.¹⁰⁹⁻¹¹² A multiple projectile has been suggested as a more effective technique, especially for large cattle.¹⁰⁹

A nonpenetrating captive bolt only stuns animals and should not be used as a sole means of euthanasia

(see "Stunning" under "Adjunctive Methods").

Advantage—The penetrating captive bolt is an effective method of euthanasia for use in slaughterhouses, in research facilities, and on the farm when use of drugs is inappropriate.

Disadvantages—(1) It is aesthetically displeasing. (2) Death may not occur if equipment is not maintained and used properly.

Recommendations—Use of the penetrating captive bolt is an acceptable and practical method of euthanasia for horses, ruminants, and swine. It is conditionally acceptable in other appropriate species. The nonpenetrating captive bolt must not be used as a sole method of euthanasia.

EUTHANASIA BY A BLOW TO THE HEAD

Euthanasia by a blow to the head must be evaluated in terms of the anatomic features of the species on which it is to be performed. A blow to the head can be a humane method of euthanasia for neonatal animals with thin craniums, such as young pigs, if a single sharp blow delivered to the central skull bones with sufficient force can produce immediate depression of the central nervous system and destruction of brain tissue. When properly performed, loss of consciousness is rapid. The anatomic features of neonatal calves, however, make a blow to the head in this species unacceptable. Personnel performing euthanasia by use of a blow to the head must be properly trained and monitored for proficiency with this method of euthanasia, and they must be aware of its aesthetic implications.

GUNSHOT

A properly placed gunshot can cause immediate insensibility and humane death. In some circumstances, a gunshot may be the only practical method of euthanasia. Shooting should only be performed by highly skilled personnel trained in the use of firearms and only in jurisdictions that allow for legal firearm use. Personnel, public, and nearby animal safety should be considered. The procedure should be performed outdoors and away from public access.

For use of a gunshot to the head as a method of euthanasia in captive animals, the firearm should be aimed so that the projectile enters the brain, causing instant loss of consciousness.^{51,112-114} This must take into account differences in brain position and skull conformation between species, as well as the energy requirement for skull bone and sinus penetration.^{109,115} Accurate targeting for a gunshot to the head in various species has been described.^{114,116-119} For wildlife and

other freely roaming animals, the preferred target area should be the head. The appropriate firearm should be selected for the situation, with the goal being penetration and destruction of brain tissue without emergence from the contralateral side of the head.¹²⁰ A gunshot to the heart or neck does not immediately render animals unconscious and thus is not considered to meet the panel's definition of euthanasia.¹²¹

Advantages—(1) Loss of consciousness is instantaneous if the projectile destroys most of the brain. (2) Given the need to minimize stress induced by handling and human contact, gunshot may at times be the most practical and logical method of euthanasia of wild or free-ranging species.

Disadvantages—(1) Gunshot may be dangerous to personnel. (2) It is aesthetically unpleasant. (3) Under field conditions, it may be difficult to hit the vital target area. (4) Brain tissue may not be able to be examined for evidence of rabies infection or chronic wasting disease when the head is targeted.

Recommendations—When other methods cannot be used, an accurately delivered gunshot is a conditionally acceptable method of euthanasia.^{114,122-125} When an animal can be appropriately restrained, the penetrating captive bolt is preferred to a gunshot. Prior to shooting, animals accustomed to the presence of humans should be treated in a calm and reassuring manner to minimize anxiety. In the case of wild animals, gunshots should be delivered with the least amount of prior human contact necessary. Gunshot should not be used for routine euthanasia of animals in animal control situations, such as municipal pounds or shelters.

CERVICAL DISLOCATION

Cervical dislocation is a technique that has been used for many years and, when performed by well-trained individuals, appears to be humane. However, there are few scientific studies to confirm this observation. This technique is used to euthanatize poultry, other small birds, mice, and immature rats and rabbits. For mice and rats, the thumb and index finger are placed on either side of the neck at the base of the skull or, alternatively, a rod is pressed at the base of the skull. With the other hand, the base of the tail or the hind limbs are quickly pulled, causing separation of the cervical vertebrae from the skull. For immature rabbits, the head is held in one hand and the hind limbs in the other. The animal is stretched and the neck is hyperextended and dorsally twisted to separate the first cervical vertebra from the skull.^{72, 111} For poultry, cervical dis-

location by stretching is a common method for mass euthanasia, but loss of consciousness may not be instantaneous.¹³⁴

Data suggest that electrical activity in the brain persists for 13 seconds following cervical dislocation,¹²⁷ and unlike decapitation, rapid exsanguination does not contribute to loss of consciousness.^{128, 129}

Advantages—(1) Cervical dislocation is a technique that may induce rapid loss of consciousness.^{84, 127} (2) It does not chemically contaminate tissue. (3) It is rapidly accomplished.

Disadvantages—(1) Cervical dislocation may be aesthetically displeasing to personnel. (2) Cervical dislocation requires mastering technical skills to ensure loss of consciousness is rapidly induced. (3) Its use is limited to poultry, other small birds, mice, and immature rats and rabbits.

Recommendations—Manual cervical dislocation is a humane technique for euthanasia of poultry, other small birds, mice, rats weighing < 200 g, and rabbits weighing < 1 kg when performed by individuals with a demonstrated high degree of technical proficiency. In lieu of demonstrated technical competency, animals must be sedated or anesthetized prior to cervical dislocation. The need for technical competency is greater in heavy rats and rabbits, in which the large muscle mass in the cervical region makes manual cervical dislocation physically more difficult.¹³⁰ In research settings, this technique should be used only when scientifically justified by the user and approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

Those responsible for the use of this technique must ensure that personnel performing cervical dislocation techniques have been properly trained and consistently apply it humanely and effectively.

DECAPITATION

Decapitation can be used to euthanatize rodents and small rabbits in research settings. It provides a means to recover tissues and body fluids that are chemically uncontaminated. It also provides a means of obtaining anatomically undamaged brain tissue for study.¹³¹

Although it has been demonstrated that electrical activity in the brain persists for 13 to 14 seconds following decapitation,¹³² more recent studies and reports indicate that this activity does not infer the ability to perceive pain, and in fact conclude that loss of consciousness develops rapidly.¹²⁷⁻¹²⁹

Guillotines that are designed to accomplish decapitation in adult rodents and small rabbits in a uniformly