



# Handle with care

## Code of Practice requires use of pain control treatments for on-farm surgical procedures

**W**hen performing procedures such as disbudding or dehorning dairy calves, you can alleviate pain with readily available, inexpensive treatments. You will also be fulfilling a requirement of the revised *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle*.

The revised code is based on the latest scientific data, and now requires you to control pain when performing surgical procedures. The Scientists' Committee Report reviews the evidence on this and other major animal welfare issues for the dairy industry, and the information is publicly available through the National Farm Animal Care Council's website at [www.nfacc.ca](http://www.nfacc.ca).

A combination of treatments, including analgesics and anaesthetics, reduce pain. The local anaesthetic lidocaine, for example, can provide a nerve block during hot-iron disbudding, reducing or eliminating the immediate pain the procedure causes. Costing just a few pennies per shot, the drug has been used safely for this procedure for decades. Moreover, dairy producers using nerve blocks report disbudding becomes less of a chore, and calves are easier to handle.

Develop a pain treatment plan with your veterinarian. It will likely include a simple nerve block like lidocaine, but keep in mind pain may well persist beyond the two to three hours that lidocaine is effective—pain from hot-iron disbudding can

last a day or more. You can reduce this pain using longer lasting analgesics, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ketoprofen.



**Treatments for chores like calf disbudding are readily available and inexpensive.**

As well, using a sedative such as xylazine can reduce handling stress and make the procedure easier to carry out.

It was once believed young animals feel less pain, a notion that more recent research has disproven. However, younger animals often recover more quickly from surgical operations, so it is better to do some procedures at an early age. Disbudding a calf at three days of age instead of dehorning her at six months, for instance, causes much less physical trauma. You still have to use pain treatment, but the pain and

post-operative recovery will be easier to manage.

Some methods of performing a procedure may cause less pain, or make the pain easier to control. An alternative to hot-iron disbudding is removing growing horn buds with caustic paste. This substance also causes pain, but research shows a single injection of the sedative and analgesic xylazine can control it.

As with any technique, it is critical to train your staff. Ensure everyone carefully follows directions and avoids over-application.

For castration and branding—performed only if strictly necessary as the *Code of Practice* requires—pain control is also necessary. Again, develop management procedures with your vet to ensure you apply appropriate measures.

We would like to hear your views on the *Code of Practice*'s requirements for pain treatment. You can participate in the University of British Columbia's online discussion of this issue by visiting the website, [www.yourviews.ubc.ca/node/1202](http://www.yourviews.ubc.ca/node/1202).

*Dr. Daniel Weary is a professor, University of British Columbia, Dr. Jeffrey Rushen is a researcher in behaviour and welfare of dairy cattle, Pacific Agri-Food Research Centre, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Agassiz, B.C., and Shelley Crabtree is acting assistant director, communications and policy, Dairy Farmers of Canada.*