AVMA News

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High Tech Tagging

In this high-tech age, people can use computers to track everything from grocery prices to stolen cars. Today, even lost pets can be tracked thanks to tiny implanted transmitters. This innovative microchip tagging technology could dramatically cut the number of dogs and cats put to death each year by reuniting them with their owners more quickly.

Despite its promise, this life-saving procedure would probably still be languishing today if it weren't for the efforts of veterinarian Bernard Pinckney, winner of the 1993 American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) Annual Animal Welfare Award.

Dr. Pinckney, 72, has always been at the leading edge of animal welfare issues. He was one of the first veterinarians in the country to work with humane groups to reduce overpopulation and improve animal living standards. His most recent contribution, however, has been to actively push for mandatory electronic tagging.

Dr. Pinckney received this prestigious award at the AVMA's fourth annual Animal Welfare Forum on November 5 at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare in Rosemont, Illinois.

A Painless Procedure

The electronic tagging procedure is quick and almost painless, Dr. Pinckney says. With a specially-designed syringe, the chip is pushed just under the animal's skin. The procedure, which has been used for years on migratory birds, can be used on pets of any size. “The animal does not even blink its eyes,” he says.

Once the chip is implanted, it can be read by a hand-held device similar to a grocery store scanner.

The key, however, is a national database that is slowly being built with the names of implanted pets. Once the chip is installed, its number is entered into a database along with the information about how to contact the owner and veterinarian. If a lost pet is found and scanned, the contact names are immediately available.

Dr. Pinckney envisions a day when every veterinarian and animal control officer will have a scanner and every animal will have a number.

“If this takes hold, we'll have mandatory point of purchase identification of animals within the next five years” Dr. Pinckney says. “Every animal will be identified, and the need for euthanasia will drop dramatically. There just will not be any unidentified pets.”

Into the Limelight

While the technology for this procedure has existed for a decade, two recent developments have sparked the interest of veterinarians: humane groups and municipal animal control agencies.

First, the technology has improved greatly, making tagging cheap and easy. After one quick shot, the chips are inside the animal, reliable and simple to scan.

Second, professional associations like the AVMA are actively promoting chip use, in part because of Dr. Pinckney's persuasive arguments. The AVMA became involved last year after Dr. Pinckney sponsored a resolution at the group's annual convention. Since then, the group's considerable clout has helped to move the procedure into the limelight.

More Reunions and Fewer Deaths

Already, the technology has made some impressive gains. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in New York City has begun mandatory microchip tagging, as has Chicago’s municipal animal control department.

In Salt Lake City, where a tagging program began a year ago, the results have been dramatic, Dr. Pinckney says. More than 400 pets were returned last year alone. “And that's 400 animals that won't have to be euthanized,” he says.

In a typical shelter situation, ten percent of the animals brought in are untagged. Most go unclaimed. “If you have 3,000 animals, you're going to have 300 come in unidentified,” Dr. Pinckney says. “Of that 300, there will only be 10
percent ever identified. The rest will be put to sleep.

The Air Force had this problem on some of its military bases until it required electronic tagging. “The first year, they had 300 unidentified animals on one of the bases. By the second year they only had 13,” he says. “That's almost reducing the problem to zero.”

**A Range of Uses**

There are many other ways these chips can be used, and all promote a more humane way of treating animals. Other uses include:

1. Shelving the branding iron - Painful branding will become a practice of the past as ranches move to electronic tagging.
2. Disease control in livestock - Tagging will also minimize the handling of animals; another welfare advantage.
3. Reducing livestock theft - Animals can be tracked from the farm to the slaughterhouse, a place where much livestock theft takes place. Every animal coming into a slaughter can be identified with a scanner.
4. Ensuring fairness in competition - Representatives from the American Kennel Club and various local Fair boards are looking to these chips to make sure show animals aren't switched before a competition. “Substitution is a very common thing in show animals,” Dr. Pinckney explains. “How, say, do you identify two white sheep? That's why judges are very interested in this.”
5. Guaranteeing that no pet is ever used for research - researchers are as anxious to avoid this as pet owners, and chipping would put a stop to unscrupulous people who steal pets and illegally sell them to research facilities.

Dr. Pinckney emphasizes, however, that the chip’s greatest promise is still in its potential to significantly reduce the millions of companion animals put to death each year.

“We've got something here,” he says. “We've had it for ten years, and it’s time we put the technology to good use.”

**SEEKING THE GENTLE COWBOY**

Forget the lasso and put away the spurs. For the best meat and the healthiest livestock, today's ranchers are using new tools of persuasion.

Dr. Temple Grandin, PhD and Assistant Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, is a leading inventor of livestock management systems. What sets them apart? They soothe the animals, rather than rankle them.

The impact of her work is extensive. A third of the beef sold today comes from cattle managed through a piece of equipment Dr. Grandin invented.

These systems can ensure humane treatment in the stockyards - as long as ranchers are willing to forsake some of their cowboy traditions. “One of the biggest problems I've got right now is changing attitudes,” Dr. Grandin says. “I can put the perfect system in, but if they have a ram-n-jam attitude, the system isn’t worth the powder to blow it up.”

**Humane Stockyards**

Dr. Grandin has spent the last 15 years designing humane ways to raise and ship livestock to market. Inventions include: systems for handling cattle out on ranches, corrals, shipping, receiving systems for feed yards, stockyard systems for meat packing plants, and slaughterhouse restrainer systems. Dr. Grandin is also actively working with the kosher meat industry to improve slaughterhouse conditions.

**Working With the Animal**

Dr. Grandin’s work is important because it is based on years of research on animal behavior. Traditional livestock management has tended to rely on pain and fear to move and control animals. Today, however, progressive managers are studying what frightens, agitates and calms the beasts. They use this work to find new ways to create an environment in which the livestock are instinctively comfortable.
“These are living animals that get scared, and we have an obligation to treat them right,” Dr. Grandin says. “You don’t need to be rough. If you understand the behavior, you can handle them gently and make them do what you want.”

A key example is the animal’s flight zone. For livestock like cattle and pigs, seeing people ahead or next to them can be unsettling, and can result in the animal balking or trying to run away. This isn’t safe for the handler and it’s an inefficient way to get the animal to behave.

To remedy this, Dr. Grandin has invented restraining devices and curved chutes with solid sides. This essentially blocks out any disturbing sights and makes the livestock feel safe.

“Animals don’t like to be cornered,” she warns. “If you get too close, they’ll try to get away from you.”

Another example is the animal’s “point of balance.” By knowing where this is, managers can control which way the animal will move instinctively. In cows, the point of balance is the shoulder. If a farmhand stands behind the shoulder, he can get the cow to move forward. But if the worker is anywhere in front of the shoulder, the cow will back up to get away from him.

Dr. Grandin says she once saw a farmhand standing in front of a balking cow, trying to move it forward with an electric cattle prod. This was distressing to the cow, dangerous for the worker - and the whole scene could have been averted with proper training, she says. “Oftentimes, you just need to give people knowledge about animal behavior, and then they’ll run with it.”

**Better Treatment is Better Business**

As a result, education has been one of Dr. Grandin’s top priorities. She emphasized that it is good business to make sure ranch employees are properly trained. In addition to reducing the injury claims that inevitably follow a mismanaged round-up, training can improve efficiency and meat quality.

Stressing cattle often reduces the animals’ immune function and lowers conception rates. Excessive prodding can lead to bruised meat which must be discarded. Relaxed cattle grow faster, are less likely to hurt workers, and their meat is more tender.

Equally important are the moral considerations. Livestock shouldn’t be forced to lead a fearful existence - these animals are smarter than many people think, Dr. Grandin says. “It’s really important to have restraint devices that don’t cause any pain,” she says. “Because animals have long memories, and they’ll remember bad things that happen to them.”

Today, Dr. Grandin says, about a quarter of the country’s livestock producers are doing a good to excellent job of managing their animals. Another 65 percent are “average” - they’re not overly abusive, but the staff and managers could benefit from additional animal behavior training. And there’s the bottom ten percent: Those people are just going to do bad stuff until they get beat over the head by the law,” she concludes.

Dr. Grandin admits that her ideas sounded a bit foreign when she first started teaching the importance of behavior. That is changing rapidly.

“In the beginning, a lot of people thought this was kind of crazy,” she laughs. “But now people realize it’s the right thing.”

“Basically, the progressive people in the industry like what I do. The dinosaurs in the industry - they think I’m crazy.”

The key to the future is the young managers and the young veterinarians, she adds. While Dr. Grandin says she can build dozens of new pieces of equipment, the welfare of farm animals won’t truly be protected until attitudes on the farm change.

“Good equipment gives you the tools to handle livestock properly,” she says. “But it’s useless without good management. Too often people buy technology as a substitute for management. That doesn’t work; you’ve got to have both.”

*Better Treatment is Better Business*