Is it Cruel to be Kind?

Today three words haunt the livestock industry. Cruel, inhumane and torture. These are all words used by animal rights groups to describe the practice of mulesing. While mulesing is a highly unpleasant act for both farmer and sheep, to leave a lamb unmulesed would have dire consequences, being more cruel to leave a sheep unmulesed rather than to mules. The wool industry has been the backbone of the Australian economy since the nineteenth century. However since the beginning of the early 2000’s, the Australian wool industry has come under attack from animal activist groups for the practice of mulesing on Australian merinos. Mulesing has been a fundamental practice across the Australian sheep industry since the 1900’s which has now turned into one of the largest controversies to hit the livestock industry. The controversy originates from animal activist groups who have developed numerous campaigns to boycott the wool industry. These groups have been able to present a bias perspective of the debate across society with little experience and knowledge to fully understand the core fundamental principles and consequences to the mulesing situation. Consequently with the increased attention and outcry from these groups, there has been a significant increase in funding of research to develop possible alternatives to the current mulesing method. It is no surprise that the opinions of those who know best, the Australian farmers, have been ignored throughout the debate. Government agencies and animal activist groups have disregarded the responses of Australian wool producers, when in reality their opinions and knowledge is undoubtedly the most crucial and key to the mulesing debate.
Animal Activist groups have had a significantly large impact throughout the debate, and it is important to analyze what effects and consequences they have directly had on the issue. As one of the most important issues to shake the Australian livestock industry, the mulesing debate has questioned the future strength of the Australian wool and livestock industry.

Since the emergence of the Australian merino in the nineteenth century, the wool industry has been crucial in the growth and development of the Australian economy. The mulesing practice developed by JHW Mules in 1927 on a farm in South Australia was designed to prevent blowfly strike on sheep (Lee, Fisher 89). The use of mulesing increased in the 1950’s and 1960’s due to the growth in demand for Australian wool which consequently saw a growth in the profession of mulesing (Lee, Fisher 89). In the past few years there has been a developing petition and debate as to whether mulesing should be allowable. Today many ask, why is mulesing so controversial? The practice of mulesing involves the removal of a layer skin around the tail and backside of the lamb. The controversy derives from the removal of the layers of skin. The procedure involves the surgical removal of skin adjacent to the perineum and tail in lambs aged between 8 and 24 weeks (Hemsworth et al 21). While mulesing is both unpleasant for lamb and farmer, the consequences of not mulesing would be much worse. Once sheep are flyblown, serious consequences can occur. Flystrike occurs when flies lay their eggs in soiled areas of wool on the sheep. The larvae burrow into the skin, impeding animal growth, damaging wool and essentially eat the sheep inside out, which then leads to death (Sneddon, Rollin 372).

The 2011 People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) campaign "There's Nothing Like Australia's Cruelty to Sheep" is the latest effort to combat the use of mulesing across Australia. The campaign is put together by composing a series of images which highlight the negative connotations associated with the mulesing practice. The images show farmers placing lambs in the mulesing cradles and then show the physical act of mulesing.
Playing throughout the entire video is the Australian national anthem ‘Advance Australia Fair’. PETA is able to capture large amounts of attention through their campaigns as they are constructed in a manner which appeals directly to the viewer’s emotions. PETA uses rhetoric elements effectively across their campaigns to capture the attention of their targeted audience and present their emotive one sided argument. This is no different in their latest campaign, which uses pathos effectively to present their one sided belief. The use of young lambs and harsh images highlighting the act of mulesing provoke powerful emotive responses from the audience. After the audience perceives that the lambs and sheep are in danger of being ‘tortured’, they instinctively develop an anti-mulesing attitude. The campaign also uses logos as a rhetorical technique to persuade the audience on the issue of mulesing. By using the negative images and video of mulesing, the audience assumes through logical reasoning that the practice of mulesing is inhumane and cruel. PETA undoubtably creates bias campaigns by ‘stacking the evidence’ by only providing evidence for one side of the argument. PETA fails the mention the consequences and effects on the sheep which occur if they are not mulesed.

As with many other social issues, it has become clear that a large proportion of the population has strong opinions but little understanding of the mulesing debate. In 2006, internationally known pop singer ‘P!NK’ joined PETA’s campaign to boycott mulesing and the Australian wool industry. Like most of PETA’s campaigns, P!NK’s three minute video was a combination of images and videos showing lambs being mulesed persuading the audience that Australian farmers are performing acts of cruelty. Throughout the video, P!NK
is dictating to the audience messages of cruelty, torture and pain. Once again, PETA’s campaign provokes powerful emotive responses across the audience and the use of ethos through a well known internationally pop sensation increases the chances of the audience accepting the message. Like many other social debates and controversies, the use of celebrities is an overplayed strategy used by PETA to convince an uneducated audience to accept the desired message. Many farmers ask, what does P!NK and these celebrities know about mulesing? Have they ever run a farm? Shorn a sheep? Had to deal with the effects of fly strike personally? The most likely answer is, no. If the wool industry collapsed, P!NK and other endorsers would fail to notice. In an ironic turn of events, later in 2007 P!NK retracted her statements on mulesing claiming she failed to fully research the issue. In an interview on channel 9 news P!NK stated:

"Again, that's something I should have researched on my own. I take full responsibility for not being 100 per cent prepared and researched,"( “Pink backs down on mulesing”, 2007)

The use of celebrities such as P!NK by PETA in their campaigns highlights the lack of knowledge on the issue and highlights that many of those endorsing these campaigns produced by PETA have no real understanding and knowledge on the issue they are speaking out against. Unfortunately today, it has become a sad reality for farmers who are forced to listen to inexperienced celebrities lecturing them on what is best for their livestock.
The current question which is consistently raised in regards to the mulesing debate is whether or not there is a suitable and effective alternative to replace mulesing. According the Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), they have spent more than $10 million in research to produce an effective alternative (Murphy, “Pain Relief”). The first alternative asked by animal activist groups is that farmers increase their monitoring of sheep for early signs of warning of fly strike. However, what PETA and other groups don’t understand is that it is difficult to tell if a sheep or lamb has been struck until the animal has physically been struck. Farmers check their mobs of sheep on a daily basis, with it being not uncommon for some farmers to have more than twenty thousand head of sheep on a large acreage of land. To rely on increased monitoring would essentially be an inefficient system which could lead to dire consequences. The second alternative proposed is the use of breach clips. The clips are attached to flaps of skin closing pressure on the flap of skin preventing blood flow. This causes the skin flap to lose circulation and eventually fall off (Woodhouse et al 121). Of all of the proposed alternatives, the breach clips have shown to have the most promise, however the results have not yet proven to be more effective than open wound mulesing. The final alternative currently being researched is the genetic altering of sheep to produce flystrike resistant sheep. These sheep would have specific indicators such as less wrinkles and skin folds, dags, bare breach area and possibilities of urine stain and wool colour alterations which increases the sheep possibilities to strike (AWI 2005). This research into breeding and selecting genetically modified sheep is a long term orientated goal for the replacement of mulesing. While there are developing alternatives and possibilities for substitute methods, mulesing is still reported to be the best solution to prevent strike by reducing the incidence by around 90 percent (Sneddon, Rollin 375).

Throughout the mulesing debate, the opinions and responses of the Australian farmers have been ignored by government and activist agencies. As any decision relating to matters
of agriculture and livestock directly influence the farmers, it is crucial that their perspectives and concerns are voiced. Never the less, there is no doubting that the individuals who deal with the livestock on a daily basis have a better understanding of what is the best option for their livestock compared to a government or activist official. A 2010 survey conducted by the University of Western Australia (Wells et al 345-357), examines the farmers responses to the societal concerns about animal welfare regarding mulesing. The survey questioned twenty two rural Australian livestock farmers and found the following results. When asked if the farmers would continue to mules thirteen stated they would continue, however stated that if an acceptable alternative method became available they would cease their mulesing practice. Six farmers had already stopped mulesing or planned to stop by 2010 and three were unsure whether they would continue to mules their sheep. Next the survey analyzed the behavioral beliefs of the farmers in relation to mulesing. Researchers found that it is commonly accepted that mulesing is not a pleasant experience for both farmer and sheep however all agreed that the short term pain was more humane for life long protection. As one interviewee said:

“Mulesing isn’t a pretty sight I’ll be honest with you, but the alternative (breech strike) is bloody worse that’s all. Skin crawling is the feeling you get”( Wells et al 650)

In relation to their beliefs on mulesing alternatives, eight farmers stated that the level of protection which mulesing provided was far greater than any other alternative method. Mulesing is cost effective and less time consuming with one time providing lifelong protection. Yet, positive comments were made about the possible alternatives. The final question posed to the farmers relates to society and the public’s opinions and attitudes towards mulesing. Thirteen said they believed the public knew little about the mulesing issue and five said their continuation of mulesing would be affected by the market demand.

Therefore, it is possible to see that there is a general consensus across Australian farmers in
favor of mulesing. Overall the attitudes, values, beliefs and perspectives of the farmers are undoubtedly the most important in the current mulesing debate which have been thoroughly neglected and ignored throughout the past decade.

The actions and voice of animal activist groups have had a significantly large impact on the Australian livestock industry. In 2004 Abercrombie and Fitch joined PETA’s campaign and began to disuse Australian merino wool. Currently other brands including H&M, Perry Ellis, HUGO BOSS, Gap, Liz Claiborne, Nordstrom, Haggar Clothing, Coppley Apparel, Austin Reed, Carter's, C&A Europe, Limited, Nike, Marks & Spencer, and Adidas have all joined the boycott (Bowmar, Gow 12). In 2008 H&M stated:

“H&M does not accept mulesing, the surgical procedure carried out on merino sheep in Australia in order to prevent flystrike. The company has decided to direct its buying towards other countries of origin and other suppliers in Australia that can guarantee mulesing-free merino wool” (Bowmar, Gow 14)

Other retailers, such as United Colors of Benetton, have taken a different route by advocating research to alternative methods to mulesing rather than boycotting the Australian wool industry. Yet, it is questionable as to whether the retail and consumer world actually cares about how and where the wool came from. As stated by Mark Grave, CEO of national wool auction body AWEX, since 2008 wool has been differentiated into mulesed and non-mulesed wool. Grace said:

"There hasn't really been a strong response in the market, and if the market is wanting any particular type of wool, then wool growers are aware and they watch the market and they look for these signals,"(Gocher, “Still little wool price premium for not mulesing” 2012).
While many groups have joined PETA in their boycotting efforts, many industries, producers and consumers are taking little attention of how and where their wool is produced. The question which still remains is, how far will PETA go?

It is still questionable as to whether the practice of mulesing will be completely outlawed in the future. The mulesing practice has proved to be the most efficient and effective way to combating the effects of blow flies and strike on Australian merinos. While there are developing alternatives, they require more research to be able to match the success of mulesing. In the meantime, there is no doubt that animal activist group’s such as PETA will continue to fight to boycott mulesing and their role could have a grim effect on the wool industry and the lives of wool producers. Aside from more research, it is crucial that the opinions and perspectives of Australian merino farmers are sought. Not only do they have hands on first experience and knowledge of mulesing and strike, but ultimately they will be the ones who will be affected if drastic changes are quickly implemented. For now, Australian farmers have to wait for an outcome on the future of mulesing and the Australian wool industry. Today all Australian farmers can do is continue to provide the best protection for their livestock’s wellbeing as they know how.


