

AN EX-POULTRY MANAGER SPEAKS OUT . . .

Having worked in the industry for five years I am relieved to have the opportunity to enlighten the public about the true conditions in which broiler chickens are 'reared.'

Welfare - there is a welfare plan on all broiler sites which should be operated to include the five freedoms: **Freedom from hunger and thirst, Freedom from discomfort, Freedom from pain, injury and disease, Freedom to express normal behaviour, and Freedom from fear and distress.**

Most managers, if not all, have been on welfare courses. In my experience this is just another bit of paperwork for show as very few practices concerning welfare are ever carried out.

The hatchery - here, where people were sexing the birds, I was surprised to see the day-old chicks going round and round on a conveyor belt system. The cockerels and pullets are put into different chutes and then proceed along another fast moving belt to be automatically counted and put into trays. These are then stacked up, sometimes 14 trays high, and taken to the lorry (until it is full) to be transported to the broiler sites. Whilst at the hatchery, I saw birds that were deformed, dying, or too small. Many of these were killed but I did see lots get missed and put into the trays to be sent to the farms. On three farms, I have seen chicks fresh from the hatchery, suffering with bloody feet. These injuries are due to the speed of the conveyor belt when their tiny feet and claws get caught on parts of the machine. The chicks are born white but a yellow dye is put in the incubation chambers to turn the chicks bright yellow. I never did find out why this was done. The chickens end up with white feathers, so why dye the chicks?

Disease - Infectious Bronchitis (**I.B.**), diarrhoea ('scouring' as it's called) and Tibial Dyscondroplasia (**T.D.**) are all common diseases found in broiler chickens. **T.D.** is a leg disorder, which causes the joints in the legs to swell because the bone is basically growing too fast (enlarged growth plates). This in turn causes the chicken to suffer terrible pain with which the bird cannot stand or walk in order to get feed and water. This process does not happen overnight, it takes approximately 2-6 days for birds to get to this stage. These birds should be culled but this is often not done and they are left just dragging themselves about. Birds are given either vitamin D3, multivitamins or Amoxinsol which is a form of penicillin. In my opinion these birds are affected from birth, which means the parent flock is also suffering.

Temperature controls - alarm temperatures should be set at 5 degrees above and below the required house temperature every day. On some sites I have seen this not adhered to and have seen thermostats set between 20-40 degrees above and below the house temperatures. From the amount of dust I have seen on them making the numbers illegible, on some sites they are not touched for days.

Heat Stress is a major cause of suffering and death, not only for chickens, but also for all intensively produced ducks and turkeys. While the public are soaking up the sun on a hot summer's day they ought to spare a thought for the millions of birds crammed together by the thousands, struggling for breath in the stifling hot, ammonia-ridden windowless sheds. I know only too well about this having experienced the sight of thousands of chickens panting heavily, trying to spread their wings, their natural way to keep cool, but unable to do so because they are all so tightly packed in. Opening all the shed vents and turning up the fans to full blast is sometimes to no avail as many of the birds die a slow death. You try to cull as many as you can but there are too many to help!



Despite it being illegal to transport livestock in an unfit condition, day-old chicks arrive at the broiler farms deformed, injured and dying.

Litter on some farms I saw was disgraceful and was so wet that the chickens tried to avoid sitting on it, yet I saw shavings on sites that could have been used to bed them down.

Segregation - in some sheds cockerels are penned off from the pullets using barriers made of wood and mesh. The chickens try to get to each other, sometimes getting stuck in the feeder track and subsequently dying. With chicks it is even worse because they all huddle up near the barriers, and many are smothered to death.

Catching - all chickens are slaughtered by just 42 days of age and are starved for six hours prior to depopulation. The lights are turned down or off and the birds are caught by hand or machine. When they hand catch, a forklift is used to collect a module from the lorry and driven into the sheds with UV lights on, often running over the chickens. The catchers pick up approx 10-15 birds at a time, holding them by one leg and throwing them into the module crates. There are eight trays to a module and 15-20 birds weighing three to four pounds are put in each tray. The module is then picked up and the whole process starts over again. Sometimes, the chickens' heads or wings get caught up in the crates as the drawers are shut causing yet more pain and distress to the birds.

A catching machine (the harvester), is often used. This is a small tractor with rubber prongs on the front which scoops up the chickens into a loading bay at the back. This is then reversed inside the shed (with shed lights off and tractor UV lights on) to put the birds onto a conveyor belt taking them to an automatic counting machine where it counts the chickens (sometimes wrongly) and puts them in modules. These are then taken off by forklift and put on the lorry. It only takes about an hour for a gang of five men to catch 4,500 chickens by hand and the same amount by machine (that's 75 birds a minute). Is this not **distressful, painful, uncomfortable, and fearful** for the birds who regularly get **injured**, left with broken wings, dislocated legs and often run over? Are the other birds that are not being caught left **hungry and thirsty** (birds are starved of food and water prior to catching)? They keep the birds on the lorry stacked in crates until it is full but think about what happens on a hot day. The birds have no water for the time that they are on the lorry and during transport to the slaughterhouse where on arrival they sometimes have to wait hours before being killed!! On this final journey many die from injuries, suffocation and heat stress.

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Inspections - when there is a supermarket site visit or audit coming up, farms are pre-warned. Normally, a day before an inspection is due the fieldsman will come on site and do a pre-inspection himself. If anything is wrong he will get things sorted and extra staff could be called in to rectify problems so as not to fail the audit. The fieldsman's job is to come round and inspect the chickens for ill health, litter conditions, alarms, house environments - basically, everything to do with the welfare of the birds. Sometimes he does not do his job properly. If he arrives late because he has been delayed on another farm he will carry out a quick check of the site, write a visit report and go home.

The area manager is responsible for all the broiler poultry houses and what goes on in them. His job is to make sure that the fieldsmen are doing their jobs. My area manager often complained that he 'didn't have enough staff to carry out necessary procedures.'

I think that supermarkets should carry out unannounced spot checks. The representatives of these companies should be allowed to go on to **any** site at **any** time without prior notice. After all, a manager is on site 24 hours a day, so he would be able to take them round. This way they would know more about what is going on. Or is it the case they do not want to know how the chickens are reared?

Biosecurity is to stop the spread of diseases but the regulations are seldom adhered to unless there is an audit. Everyone entering poultry sites should spray the wheels of their cars with the wheelspray provided and there is a sign on the gate to this effect. Why have a sign if no one takes any notice of it? I guess it is just for show. Even my managers and veterinary personnel have all been seen not spraying their wheels, and yet they go to other poultry farms in the course of a day risking the spread of disease from farm to farm. Another regulation which is often ignored is the use of footdips on site before entering the sheds. Again this only seems to happen if vets or supermarket reps are on site and I've seen both the area manager and the fieldsman fail to do this on a number of occasions.

The way the old Antec farm fluid is disposed of is often irresponsible. On three sites I have been to this was either poured down a soakaway drain or onto the ground, whereas there should be separate containers available for its disposal. This shoddy practice does not do the wildlife or water courses any good. The firm I worked for had already been fined for bad water quality but continued to ignore the rules.

Culling - the way I have seen the area manager and other employees cull birds is cruel and I believe it to be illegal. They pick the birds up by the head and spin them around until the neck is broken. This causes a strangulation effect on the bird and must be very painful..

Ammonia levels in the poultry houses are supposed to be checked by the fieldsmen, but this is not always done - unless there is a site visit due by a supermarket representative etc. If the levels are too high, it burns the tiny hairs off the backs of the chickens' throats and causes what is known as 'snicking'.

Lighting - the chickens do not see daylight from the moment they are brought in, to the moment they are caught for slaughter. The only light they see is from light bulbs or strip lights. I have seen the twenty-two hour lighting programme being overridden by a switch on the main panel in order to give the birds two hours more light (24 hours light). This is often overlooked when there is an inspection or audit etc. Unless they knew about this switch, they would not know what to look for. (Broiler chickens should be allowed two hours of darkness in order to get them used to being without light in the event of a powercut.)

Weighing - this is done by picking up five birds by one leg and tying string around the legs. These are then hung on scales to be weighed. Does this not cause pain to the birds?

Staffing - I have seen a site operating with only three staff - one full-time manager, a full-time and a part-time assistant - to look after approximately 230,000 chickens. With only three people it is impossible to check all these birds, as well as do all the other jobs on the farm during the day. On this site, I saw that it took the manager and the staff just two hours to walk the whole site of 15 sheds and at weekends it was more like one hour. On Sundays the manager did not check the birds or pick up the dead but only filled in the relevant paperwork to say that he did.

I respect what Hillside are doing and think that it's excellent that the general public should be made aware of how the food they eat is treated while it is still alive.

On a hot summer's day spare a thought for the millions of birds crammed together by the thousands, struggling for breath in stifling hot, ammonia-ridden windowless sheds.



Prosecutions update

◆ A third man has now been arrested and awaiting charges in connection with a Hillside investigation which exposed a third illegal slaughterhouse. The two other men have been charged and are awaiting trial.

◆ In Norfolk, our investigators are preparing to give evidence in a case regarding cruelty to ducks on an RSPCA 'monitored' Freedom Food farm following our exposé. This case having already been adjourned three times, is now to be heard (as we go to print) at Thetford Magistrates' Court on 19th December 2003.

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Animal Investigations Appeal

please visit our donation page

Undercover Investigation Video

A video giving an insight into Hillside's undercover investigations is available **FREE** of charge

This video shows the commonplace suffering of animals in the intensive factory farming industry



Can You Help Distribute Hillside Leaflets?

Please help us create awareness and support by giving Hillside leaflets (which include details of our farm animal investigations) to your friends, family or neighbours. We would also be grateful if you are able to distribute them, i.e. in shops, at work, in waiting rooms or door to

door etc. If you would like to help support Hillside in this way, please request the amount you require via our e-mail.

Thank you