Attitude of Flemish pig producers concerning the castration of piglets and alternative strategies to deal with the boar taint problem: preliminary survey results

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Introduction
Pig producers are a key stakeholder in the discussion about the surgical castration of male piglets and about the increasing pressure to implement alternative, more humane strategies to deal with the problem of boar taint. As part of the EU-Pigcas project information was gathered about the attitude of representatives from relevant stakeholder organisations from 24 European countries regarding the various strategies to deal with the boar taint problem. However, in the scientific literature very little information about the attitude and perception of pig farmers themselves is available (but see Frederiksen and Nafstad 2006). The aim of this study, therefore, was to conduct a survey among Flemish (North Belgium) pig producers in order to investigate their attitude and perception towards surgical castration and the possible alternatives.

Materials and Methods
At the end of 2007, a postal questionnaire was sent to randomly selected owners of 266 Flemish pig farms with at least 10 sows or 50 fattening pigs. The first part of the questionnaire concerned general data about the farmer and his/her farm. The second part included the same questions that were asked to the stakeholder representatives in the Pigcas project. The results reported here are based on the 159 (response rate: 60%) correctly completed questionnaires that had been received by February 2008 and mainly concern the question in which farmers were asked to rank their preference for the five strategies: surgical castration without anesthesia (SCN), surgical castration with anesthesia (SCA), immunocastration (IC), sperm sexing (SS) and the production of entire males (EM).

Results
The farmers’ mean order of preference for the different alternatives was SCN > SS > SCA > IC > EM. This differed from the order derived from the three Flemish pig producer organisation surveyed by Pigcas: IC > SCN > SCA > SS = EM (Figure 1). The discrepancy was greatest for IC and SS and smallest for EM. The respondents’ self-reported knowledge about the alternatives to surgical castration was significantly correlated with their preference for SCA (negatively) and SS (positively). The number of pigs on the farm was also correlated with the farmer’s preference for SCN (negatively), SCA (negatively) and SS (positively), and with the farmer’s attitude towards IC relative to SCN (positively).

Pig producers ranked SCA negatively with regards to labour (Figure 2). SCN was ranked highest for farm profitability, animal performance, and effectiveness against boar taint but lowest for animal welfare and consumer acceptance. EM, and to a lesser extend IC, were ranked low for effectiveness against boar taint. EM was also ranked low for farm profitability. SS was given a high rank for most aspects but particularly for labour, animal welfare, effectiveness against boar taint and consumer acceptance. The farmers’ attitude towards IC relative to SCN was for 41% (R²) explained by the perceived effectiveness of IC against boar taint and its safety to the farmer. For female respondents, however, farmers’ safety did not significantly explain variation in attitude towards IC versus SCN.

Discussion
These results illustrate that the order of preference for the different strategies to deal with the boar taint problem reported by the small number of representatives of the national pig producer organisations as part of the Pigcas project may not always correspond with the opinion of the farmers themselves. Surveying farmers also allows valuable in-depth analyses of what influences their perception and attitude towards the alternative strategies. A better understanding of each stakeholder group’s opinion may improve and facilitate communication between stakeholders about this intricate issue.
Figure 1: Mean inverted rank preferences for the five alternative strategies to deal with boar taint according to the Flemish pig producers themselves versus the pig producer organisation representatives. SCN: surgical castration without anesthesia, SCA: surgical castration with anesthesia, IC: immunocastration, SS: sperm sexing, EM: production of entire males. (high score indicates high preference).

Figure 2: Mean inverted rank preferences of the five alternative regarding labour, animal welfare, effectiveness against boar taint, animal performance, farm profitability and consumer acceptance (different letters indicate significant differences between alternatives, P<0.05).

References