

**excerpt: Enter the Chicken Shed [draft]**

Enter a typical chicken shed and you will experience a burning feeling in your eyes and your lungs. That's the ammonia - it comes from the birds' droppings, which are simply allowed to pile up on the floor, without being cleaned out, not merely during the growing period of each flock, but typically for an entire year, and sometimes for several years.<sup>1</sup> High ammonia levels give the birds chronic respiratory disease, foot pad lesions, hock burns, and breast blisters. It makes their eyes water, and when it is really bad, many birds go blind.<sup>2</sup> The breast blisters are caused by the fact that as the birds get heavier, it hurts them to keep standing up, so they spend much of their time sitting on the excrement-filled litter.

Broilers have been bred over many generations to produce the maximum amount of meat in the least amount of time. Broilers now grow three times as fast as broilers in

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<sup>1</sup> See H.L. Brodie et al, "Structures for Broiler Litter Manure Storage," Fact Sheet 416, Maryland Cooperative Extension [www.agnr.umd.edu/users/bioreng/fs416.htm](http://www.agnr.umd.edu/users/bioreng/fs416.htm), refer, without any suggestion of criticism, to delaying manure cleanout for 3 years. See also Anon."Animal Waste Management Plans" *Delaware Nutrient Management Notes*, Delaware Department of Agriculture, Vol. 1, No. 7 (July 2000), where the calculations are based on 90 per cent of the litter remaining in place for two years.

<sup>2</sup> Berg C, "Foot-Pad Dermatitis in Broilers and Turkeys," *Veterinaria* 36 (1998); Wang GJ, Ekstrand C, and Svedberg J, "Wet Litter and Perches as Risk Factors for the Development of Foot Pad Dermatitis in Floor-Housed Hens," *British Poultry Science* 39 (1998): 191-7; Wathes CM, "Aerial Emissions from Poultry Production," *World Poultry Science Journal* 54 (1998): 241-51; Kristensen and Wathes, op cit; Muirhead S, "Ammonia Control Essential to Maintenance of Poultry Health," *Feedstuffs* (April 13, 1992): 11. Cited from Compassion Over Killing's *A COK Report: Animal Suffering in the Broiler Industry*. <http://www.chickenindustry.com/cfi/broilerindustryreport/full/>. On blindness caused by ammonia, see also Michael P. Lacy, "Litter Quality and Performance," University of Georgia College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, <http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubcd/L426-w.html>

the 1950s, while consuming one-third as much feed [Havenstein GB, Ferket PR, Qureshi MA, “Growth, livability, and feed conversion of 1957 versus 2001 broilers when fed representative 1957 and 2001 broiler diets,” *Poultry Science* 2003; 82:1500-1508.]. But this efficiency has come at a cost: broilers’ bone growth is outpaced by the growth of their muscles and fat. One study found that 90 percent of broilers had detectable leg problems, while 26 percent suffered chronic pain as a result of bone disease.<sup>3</sup> Professor John Webster, of the University of Bristol’s School of Veterinary Science, has said: “Broilers are the only livestock that are in chronic pain for the last 20% of their lives. They don't move around, not because they are overstocked, but because it hurts their joints so much.”<sup>4</sup> Sometimes vertebrae snap, causing paralysis. Paralysed birds, or birds whose legs have collapsed, cannot get to food or water, and – because the growers don’t bother to, or don’t have time to, check on individuals birds - die of thirst or starvation. Unable to avoid more aggressive birds in the crowded sheds, they may also be pecked to death.

To encourage the newly-hatched birds to eat constantly, the lights are at first kept on 24 hours a day. Chicks who would normally be sleeping under their mothers’ wings for part of the day and all of the night are instead walking around the shed under bright lights with so many other birds that they cannot recognize them as individuals or learn their place in the pecking order. They eat more, and gain weight so fast that their bones and hearts can’t cope with their bulging bodies. Some of the young birds don’t even make it through the 45 days it takes to bring them to market weight. They suddenly lose their balance, flap their wings, go into spasms, and die. It’s a form of heart failure the

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<sup>3</sup>Kestin SC, Knowles TG, Tinch AE, and Gregory NG, “Prevalence of Leg Weakness in Broiler Chickens and Its Relationship with Genotype,” *The Veterinary Record* 131 (1992): 190-4. Cited from Compassion Over Killing’s *A COK Report: Animal Suffering in the Broiler Industry*. <http://www.chickenindustry.com/cfi/broilerindustryreport/full/>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian*, October 14, 1991; cited in Animals Australia Fact Sheet, “Meat Poultry”, <http://www.animalsaustralia.org/default2.asp?idL1=1273&idL2=1293>.

industry calls “acute death syndrome.” Given these health problems and the vast number of animals involved – nearly 9 billion in the United States – Professor Webster has called industrial chicken production, “in both magnitude and severity, the single most severe, systematic example of man's inhumanity to another sentient animal” [John Webster, *Animal Welfare: A Cool Eye Towards Eden*, (1994) p 156]

Criticize industrial farming, and industry spokespeople are sure to respond that it is in the interests of those who raise animals to keep them healthy and happy so that they will grow well. Commercial chicken-rearing conclusively refutes this claim. Birds who starve to death may cost the grower money, but it is the total productivity of the shed that matters. G. Tom Tabler, who manages the Applied Broiler Research Unit at the University of Arkansas, and A. M. Mendenhall, of the Department of Poultry Science at the same university, have posed the question: “Is it more profitable to grow the biggest bird and have increased mortality due to heart attacks, ascites (another illness caused by fast growth), and leg problems, or should birds be grown slower so that birds are smaller, but have fewer heart, lung and skeletal problems?” Once such a question is asked, as the researchers themselves point out, it takes only “simple calculations” to draw the conclusion that, depending on the various costs, often “it is better to get the weight and ignore the mortality.”<sup>5</sup>

It’s no surprise, then, to learn that these birds receive no individual veterinary care. In fact, in the whole United States, there are only 70 veterinarians responsible for the care of 8.7 billion chickens. [National Institute for Animal Agriculture, Vet schools to re-shape curricula to meet 21st century challenges, April 11, 2005, [http://animalagriculture.org/headline/2005NR/NR\\_2005Osburn.htm](http://animalagriculture.org/headline/2005NR/NR_2005Osburn.htm)] If a chicken is sick, it’s cheaper to let the chicken die than to provide treatment.

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<sup>5</sup> Tabler GT and Mendenhall AM, “Broiler Nutrition, Feed Intake and Grower Economics,” *Avian Advice* 5(4) (Winter 2003), p.9.

Breeding chickens for rapid growth creates a different problem for the breeder birds, who are the parents of the chickens people eat. The parents have the same genetic characteristics as their offspring – including huge appetites. But the breeder birds must live to maturity, and keep on breeding as long as possible. If they were given as much food as their appetites demand, they would grow grotesquely fat and might die before they became sexually mature. If they survived at all, they would be unable to breed. So Tyson Foods, like other breeder operators, restricts the amount of feed to less than half of what the breeder birds would eat if they could. The National Chicken Council’s “Animal Welfare Guidelines” refer to “off-feed days,” that is, days on which the hungry birds get no food at all. This is liable to make them drink “excessive” amounts of water, so the water, too, can be restricted on those days. In short, the breeding birds are half-starved and permanently hungry, as well as often thirsty. They compulsively peck the ground, even when there is nothing there, either to relieve the stress, or in the vain hope of finding something to eat. It is hard to see how any reasonable person could disagree with Mr Justice Bell, in the *McLibel* case, who examined this practice, and said: “My conclusion is that the practice of rearing breeders for appetite, that is to feel especially hungry, and then restricting their feed with the effect of keeping them hungry, is cruel. It is a well-planned device for profit at the expense of suffering of the birds.”

After six weeks, the young chickens are caught, put into crates, and trucked to slaughter. Dr Henry Classen, of the Department of Animal and Poultry Science at the University of Saskatchewan, in Canada, has described catching chickens as “one of the most undesirable jobs in the poultry industry.” He refers to the “large numbers of broilers to be caught in a relatively short catching time” and says that the work is repetitive, boring, and frequently takes place in a “poor house environment.”<sup>6</sup> The latter phrase refers to the dusty and ammonia-filled atmosphere in which the catchers must work. A Washington Post journalist observed the catchers at work: “They grab birds by their legs, thrusting them like sacks of laundry into the cages, sometimes applying a shove.” To do their job more quickly, the catchers pick up only one leg of each bird, so that they can

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<sup>6</sup> California Poultry Letter, University of California - Cooperative Extension  
September - October 1999, <http://animalscience.ucdavis.edu/Avian/cpl1099.htm>

hold four or five chickens in each hand. (The National Chicken Council's "Animal Welfare Code," eager as ever to avoid curtailing any practice that may be economically advantageous, says "The maximum number of birds per hand is five.") Dangling from one leg or wing, the frightened birds flap and writhe, and often suffer dislocated and broken hips, broken wings, and internal bleeding.<sup>7</sup> Classen acknowledges that catchers "may become bored, indifferent or fatigued and as a result handle broilers in a way that compromises the bird's welfare." That puts it mildly. A film taken with a hidden camera has revealed that some catchers literally throw the live chickens into the crates. When the crates are full, the catchers close them as if trying to shut an overstuffed dresser drawer, while birds flap, trying to get out. A fork-lift picks the crates up and puts them on the trucks.

The birds then have to endure, in cramped cages, a journey to the slaughterhouse that can take several hours. During this ordeal, they will have no food or water – and in addition, food will have been withdrawn for the eight hours prior to their being caught. In extremes of heat or cold, some will die of heat exhaustion or freeze to death. On arrival at the slaughterhouse, the birds may have to wait many more hours in their crates, still without water or food. When their turn to be removed from the crates finally comes, they are tossed onto a conveyor belt that takes them to what slaughterhouse employees call "live hang". Russell Cobb, a journalist investigating labor conditions in the poultry industry, wrote this description:

Here, workers known as "chicken hangers" grab birds by their feet and sling them on to fast-moving metal hooks. This is the first—and dirtiest—stage of poultry

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<sup>7</sup> 43. Duncan IJH, "The Assessment of Welfare During the Handling and Transport of Broilers," In: JM Faure and AD Mills (eds.), *Proceedings of the Third European Symposium on Poultry Welfare*, (Tours, France: French Branch of the World Poultry Science Association, 1989), pp. 79-91; Gregory NG and Wilkins LJ, "Skeletal Damage and Bone Defects During Catching and Processing," In: *Bone Biology and Skeletal Disorders in Poultry*. Whitehead CC, ed. (Carfax Publishing, Abingdom, England, 1992). Cited from *A COK Report: Animal Suffering in the Broiler Industry*.

processing. The birds, weighing approximately five pounds each, fight back by pecking, biting, and scratching the hangers, who wear plastic cones around their forearms to shield off chicken attacks. Then, as workers finally hoist the birds onto the hooks, the chickens urinate and defecate out of desperation, often hitting the workers below.<sup>8</sup>

The metal hooks, from which the birds are hanging upside down, compress the metatarsal bones in the chickens' feet. Researchers have described this as likely to be extremely painful.<sup>9</sup> Once hung from the hooks, the birds move down towards the killing room. Speed is the essence, because the slaughterhouse is paid by the number of pounds of chicken that comes out the end. Today a killing line typically moves at 90 birds a minute, and speeds can go as high as 120 birds a minute, or 7200 an hour. Even the lower rate is twice as fast as the lines moved twenty years ago. At such speeds, even if the handlers wanted to handle the birds gently and with care, they just couldn't do it.

In the United States, in contrast to other developed nations, the law does not require that chickens (or ducks, or turkeys) be rendered unconscious before they are slaughtered. As the birds move down the killing line, still upside down, their heads are dipped into an electrified waterbath, which in the industry is called "the stunner." But this is a misnomer. Dr Mohan Raj, a researcher in the Department of Clinical Veterinary

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<sup>8</sup> 98 See Russell Cobb, "The Chicken Hangers," *In The Fray*, February 2, 2004, available online at: [http://www.thelaborers.net/NEWS/poultry\\_workers/default.htm](http://www.thelaborers.net/NEWS/poultry_workers/default.htm). Cited from Human Rights Watch, *Blood, Sweat and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants*, Human Rights Watch, New York, 2004, p.39.

<sup>9</sup> Gentle M J and Tilston V L (2000), 'Nociceptors in the legs of poultry: Implications for potential pain in preslaughter shackling', *Animal Welfare*, 9, 227-236; we owe this reference to A.B.M. Raj, "Stunning and slaughter of poultr," in G. C. Mead, ed., *Poultry Meat Processing and Quality*, Woodhead Publishing Company, Cambridge, UK, 2004, pp 65-89.

Science at the University of Bristol, in England, has recorded the brain activity of chickens after various forms of stunning and reported his results in such publications as *World's Poultry Science Journal*. We asked him: "Can the American consumer be confident that broilers he or she buys in a supermarket have been properly stunned so that they are unconscious when they have their throats cut?" His answer was clear: "No. The majority of broilers are likely to be conscious and suffer pain and distress at slaughter under the existing water bath electrical stunning systems." He went on to explain that the type of electrical current used in the stunning procedure was not adequate to make the birds immediately unconscious. Using a current that would produce immediate loss of consciousness, however, would risk damage to the quality of the meat. Since there is no legal requirement for stunning, the industry won't take that risk. Instead, the substantially less than adequate current that is used evidently paralyzes the birds without rendering them unconscious. From the point of view of the slaughterhouse operator, inducing paralysis is as good as inducing unconsciousness, for it stops the birds thrashing about and makes it easier to cut their throats.

Some birds miss the electrified water bath altogether. They may pull their heads up as the line goes over the bath, or they may be smaller birds, so-called "runts" whose bodies are not long enough for their heads to reach down into the water. If the waterbath were an effective stunner, the fact that these birds are not stunned at all would be a matter of concern. But probably these birds are only missing out on a painful, paralyzing electric shock. Because of the high line speed, even the throat-cutting that follows the waterbath misses some birds, and they then go alive and conscious into the next stage of the process, a tank of scalding water. It is difficult to get figures on how many birds are, in effect, boiled alive, but documents obtained under the Freedom of Information act indicate that in the United States alone, it could be as many as three million a year.<sup>10</sup> At that rate, 11 chickens would have been scalded to death in the time it takes you to read this page. But the real figure might be much higher. An undercover videotape made at a

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<sup>10</sup> Freedom of Information Act #94-363, Poultry Slaughtered, Condemned, and Cadavers, 6/30/94; cited in United Poultry Concerns, "Poultry Slaughter: The Need for Legislation", <http://www.upc-online.org/slaughter/slaughter3web.pdf>.

Tyson slaughterhouse at Heflin, Alabama, shows dozens of birds who have been mutilated by throat-cutting machines that were not working properly. Workers rip the heads off live chickens that have been missed by the cutting blade. Conscious birds go into the scalding tank. A plant worker is recorded as saying that it is acceptable for 40 birds per shift to be missed by the backup killer and scalded alive.<sup>11</sup>

If you found the last few paragraphs unpleasant reading, Virgil Butler, who spent years working for Tyson Foods, in the killing room of a slaughterhouse in Grannis, Arkansas, killing 80,000 chickens a night, mostly for KFC, says that what we have described “doesn’t even come close to the horrors I have seen.” The killing line on which he worked moved so quickly that it was impossible to kill all the chickens before the line moved on. On a good night, he says, 14 percent of the chickens were alive when they went into the scalding tank. On an average night, it might be 3 chickens in every 10. The missed birds are, according to Butler, “scalded alive.” They “flop, scream, kick, and their eyeballs pop out of their heads.” Often they come out “with broken bones and disfigured and missing body parts because they’ve struggled so much in the tank.”<sup>12</sup> When there were mechanical failures the supervisor would refuse to stop the line, even though he knew that chickens were going into the scalding tank alive, or were having their legs broken by unsuitable equipment.

The supervisor’s action may have been “rational” in the sense of maximising the profitability of the plant by keeping the speed of the line as high as possible, irrespective of how much the chickens are suffering. But some of the suffering Butler reports is not rational even in that narrow sense. When people are under pressure, and angry with their boss or frustrated about their working conditions, they can do strange things. In January

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<sup>11</sup> “Tyson to Probe Chicken-slaughter Methods,” *Associated Press*, May 25, 2005; <http://www.torturedbytyson.com>.

<sup>12</sup> Signed statement of Tyson employee, Virgil Butler, January 30, 2003. <http://www.goveg.com/feat/a-tyson1.html>. See also Butler’s blog, <http://www.cyberactivist.blogspot.com>

2003 Butler made a public statement describing workers pulling chickens apart, stomping on them, beating them, running over them on purpose with a fork-lift truck, and even blowing them up with dry ice “bombs”. Tyson dismissed the statement as the “outrageous” inventions of a disgruntled worker who had lost his job. It’s true that Butler has a conviction for burglary, and has had other problems with the law. But eighteen months after Butler made these supposedly “outrageous” claims, a videotape secretly filmed at another KFC-supplying slaughterhouse, in Moorfield, West Virginia, made his claims a lot more credible. The slaughterhouse had won KFC’s “Supplier of the Year” Award, and was operated by Pilgrim’s Pride, the second largest chicken producer in the nation. The tape, taken by an undercover investigator working for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, showed slaughterhouse workers behaving in ways quite similar to those described by Butler: slamming live chickens into walls, jumping up and down on them, and drop-kicking them as if they were footballs. The undercover investigator said that, beyond what he had been able to catch on camera, he had witnessed "hundreds" of acts of cruelty. Workers had ripped off a bird’s head to write graffiti in blood, plucked feathers off live chickens to "make it snow," suffocated a chicken by tying a latex glove over its head, and squeezed birds like water balloons to spray feces over other birds. The investigator thought that the workers did this because they were bored or needed to vent their frustrations at the nature of the work.

The only significant difference between the behavior of the workers at Moorfield and that described by Butler at Grannis was that the behavior at Moorfield was caught on tape. Unable to dismiss the evidence of cruelty, Pilgrim’s Pride said that it was “appalled.”<sup>13</sup> But neither Pilgrim’s Pride nor Tyson Foods, the two largest suppliers of chicken in America, have done anything to address the root cause of the problem: unskilled, low-paid workers doing dirty, bloody work, often in stifling heat, under

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<sup>13</sup> For the video, and other materials, see [www.peta.org/feat/moorefield](http://www.peta.org/feat/moorefield); see also Donald G. McNeil Jr., KFC Supplier Accused of Animal Cruelty The New York Times, July 20, 2004; <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/20/business/20chicken.html>

constant pressure to keep the killing lines moving no matter what so that they can slaughter up to 90,000 animals every shift.