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Consumers' awareness of piglet castration and attitudes towards alternatives to surgical castration: results from North Macedonia

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One of the most challenging welfare problem in pig production is surgical castration of male piglets without the use of anesthesia and analgesia. Farmers in North Macedonia are traditionally castrated their male piglets surgically unanesthetized in the first week of life, mainly to avoid the unpleasant boar taint of pork and to reduce male-specific behaviour, and this procedure is still common in most Western Balkans countries. Alternatives for avoidance of surgical castration in pig production are raising entire males or immunocastration. In order to provide an overview of consumer perception towards surgical castration and their alternatives, an exploratory survey was carried out involving 130 randomly selected consumers from April to June 2021 via an online questionnaire. The recruitment of the consumers was done through an existing network of professional and family acquaintances in an extended way, by further dissemination of the questionnaire through their networks. The questionnaire was development in COST IPEMA network and included statements related to consumption of pork meat, purchasing habits, awareness of piglet surgical castration and knowledge toward alternatives of castration. Respondents were asked to fill in socio-demographic information and their professional or personal connection to animal production. The most of the respondents were situated in urban area, therefore the results couldn't be generalized for rural people. Overall, 72% of the respondents were confident that the meat they eat is safe. The most of the respondents (75%) had a positive attitude towards the use of vaccines in pig production. The majority of the respondents (62%) indicate that they did not know how male piglets are mainly produced. Overall, 45% of the respondents indicated to be aware of versus 55% unaware of the practice of piglet castration. Surgical castration without pain relief (47.3%) and rearing entire males (53.5%) showed the lowest acceptability. Within the alternatives castration with anaesthesia was broadly accepted by the respondents. Most respondents indicated that the lowest price is not crucial in decision to buy pork but good taste is primary. Three clusters could be defined based on the respondents' agreement to the different statement for each of the alternatives to surgical castration. However, after being informed, the majority wanted unanesthetized castration to be banned. In that context, a moderate to very high acceptability can be expected from the alternatives, if performed according to the best practices.