Temple Grandin on what doctors should know about slaughterhouses

MAR 30, 2023

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A newly published interview with Temple Grandin, PhD, a professor of animal science at Colorado State University who specializes in livestock handling and welfare, provides insights into slaughterhouse methods that minimize animal suffering.

The interview with Grandin—a prominent advocate for the humane treatment of animals and subject of the eponymously titled, Emmy-winning 2010 HBO biopic starring Claire Danes—appears in the upcoming April issue of?AMA Journal of Ethics® (@JournalofEthics) that focuses on the topic of “Meat and Health.”

In the interview, Grandin expands on her accompanying Journal of Ethics article, “Answers to Patient, Student and Clinician Questions About How Animals Are Slaughtered and Used for Food,” which explores how animals react to slaughter, methods for rendering livestock unconscious, and ways to ameliorate welfare issues throughout a farm animal’s life.

What is owed to animals

“The main point is that the animals we raise for food—we’ve got to prevent suffering, give them a life worth living, and then when they go to the slaughter plant, painless death,” Grandin said. “Now, slaughterhouses are not perfect, but compared to 20 years ago, they are a whole lot better.”

One thing that has helped drive recent improvements in slaughterhouse standards is that a number of major customers, such as fast food companies, now inspect them, Grandin noted.

Still, some slaughtering methods need refinement to ensure animals experience a low-stress death. One of those: CO₂ stunning. This involves exposing animals to increasing levels of carbon dioxide to gradually induce insensibility. For some species, including poultry, this has the significant welfare
advantage of reducing stress. Other species, such as pigs, sometimes experience a violent reaction and attempt to escape from their containers.

“They’re correctable,” Grandin said, adding that other stunning methods—such as captive bolt and electric stunning—cause instantaneous unconsciousness when used correctly. “Also, you’ve got to handle animals quietly. This is where a lot of plants have really improved.”

Slaughterhouses, like just about any other industrial operation, require a culture of continuous quality improvement.

“It’s not a matter of just buying equipment,” Grandin said. “You have to manage the equipment that you have, and have managers who care about animal welfare.”

**Repaying the environment**

Ethical concerns about industrial food production also extend to the environment. One of Grandin’s areas of research is grazing.

“There’s huge amounts of land in the U.S. and in other countries where the only thing you can use that land for is grazing—it’s too arid for crops,” Grandin said. “There’s a 100-mile stretch in Eastern Colorado of prairie where grazing is the only thing you could do with it. And if you do grazing correctly, you can actually improve the land. In other words, grazing animals—bison, cattle, sheep and goats—may be part of the solution to a problem.”

Grandin also sees an added use for solar farms, which now stretch from California to New England.

“They need to have sheep grazing under them,” Grandin said. “You need to be using that land under those solar panels.”

Additional articles in the April issue explore how physicians should respond to patients experiencing ongoing present traumatic stress of industrial meat production, how food offered by health care organizations should meet ecological needs, and what medical and other health professions students should know about industrial agriculture and disease.