Quantification of aggressive and sexual behaviour in group-reared intact male growing pigs

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Background

In North American pork production, male piglets are castrated to avoid problems with boar taint. The castration is typically performed without anaesthesia, a practice that reduces the pigs' welfare by causing pain. Additionally, castrated pigs do not grow as efficiently as intact boars. There is growing interest, therefore, to investigate ways to raise intact boars for pork production.

Objective

To quantify the aggressive and sexual behaviour of boars raised in groups under typical production conditions relative to the behaviour of barrows.

Methods

A 12 week behavioural assay was conducted where pens of pigs were observed and all occurrences of aggressive and sexual behaviour were recorded. Feed intake was measured by pen and pigs were weighed weekly to calculate feed efficiency values. The trial ended when average live weight reached 105-115 kg.

Preliminary Results

Statistical analysis is pending, but as expected, the boars were much more active than the barrows, exhibiting higher frequencies and intensities of aggression and sexual behaviour. However, we think that there may be ways of controlling this. The growth performance of the boars was similar to that of the barrows, which may reflect the energy cost of the observed increase in activity.

Take Home Message

Raising intact males for pork production is feasible, although the advantage of superior growth efficiency seems to be negated by the increase in activity. More importantly, with the intention of increasing animal welfare, the elimination of castration may impose another chronic stress on the pigs due to more frequent negative social interactions with conspecifics. Further analysis is pending.

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