

LETTERS

Deer hunting and welfare

Sir,

As members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons we read with dismay the recent letter in your journal (*Animal Welfare* 2001, 10: 115–116) from Dr Bradshaw and Professor Bateson in which they seem to dismiss as insignificant the acute pain and suffering that may be endured by deer shot by stalkers and not killed outright. Even supposing their analogy with soldiers shot and wounded in the heat of battle is correct, that still leaves 30 per cent to suffer acute pain and distress. But the analogy is not correct. Soldiers shot in the heat of battle not only benefit from the well recognised phenomenon of stress analgesia, mediated, in part, by centrally released endorphins and enkephalins, but they are also shot with hard nosed bullets. These are considerably less tissue-damaging than the soft nosed bullets used in stalking, which are designed specifically to cause maximum shock and damage on impact and thereby reduce the chance of escape. Unlike soldiers in battle, stalked deer are shot unsuspecting and unstressed, in the absence therefore of any stress-induced analgesia, and so may suffer acute, severe pain that remains unameliorated until they are finally dispatched sometime after the first shot. A small proportion of shot deer, presumably in varying degrees of pain, will escape and either die through starvation and sepsis or will adapt to their wounds — that is unless they are found by hounds at some later stage.

The protracted and painful death of deer not killed outright by shooting may be contrasted with the certain and instantaneous death of the hunted deer which, even in the final stages of the hunt, will have suffered no more stress than that of the extended racehorse or athlete and

may be expected to benefit at the same time from exercise-induced analgesia. The final shot comes at point blank range from the huntsman straight into the brain of the animal at bay, thereby bringing about an instantaneous and painless death.

Stalking will always be needed, in addition to hunting, to control numbers of Red deer but the welfare of wild animals is not well served by the suggestion that shooting may not lead to acute pain and suffering.

L H Thomas, Newbury, UK

D R Wise, Cambridge, UK

D R Denny, Worcester, UK

I G Jones, Newtown, UK

W R Allen, Newmarket, UK

Dr Bradshaw and Professor Bateson reply:

Thomas *et al* have not done their homework. First, a pain-free period after injury is commonly observed in humans patients who were unsuspecting and unstressed prior to their accidents. Second, the evidence for exercise-induced analgesia in humans has been weak, inconsistent, or anecdotal.

The moral imperative on any sportsman is to reduce the risk of suffering by endeavouring to kill an animal as swiftly and cleanly as possible. Stalking clearly has the potential to lead to pain and injury, as does hunting. However, it does seem to us that the welfare costs of stalking are more easily reduced than those associated with hunting with hounds. The vets who attempt to minimise the problems with stag-hunting should stop the bluster and tell the world how the welfare costs of hunting with hounds might also be reduced.

Elizabeth Bradshaw, Oxford, UK

Patrick Bateson, Cambridge, UK