

## **An HSUS Report: Welfare Issues with Caponizing**

### **Abstract**

Caponizing cockerels has been banned in the United Kingdom due to animal welfare concerns, yet no state or federal regulations prohibit the castration of male chickens in the United States, and crude instructions and surgical implements are easily available on numerous websites. The procedure is typically performed on fully conscious, unanesthetized, young male chickens and inflicts both pain and suffering on the birds.

### **Introduction**

A capon is a young male chicken who has been castrated. The testes of a male bird are internal, so the operation requires surgical removal of the reproductive organs through an incision between the last two ribs. The surgery is normally performed on fully conscious animals who have not been anesthetized or provided with painkiller.

Caponizing kits are sold online<sup>1</sup> and through poultry supply companies, commonly including “easy-to-follow instructions, knife, rib spreader, slotted spoon, probe, forceps, ‘S’ hooks, and cord”<sup>2</sup> to tie down the bird, and the equipment used to perform the surgery have remained unchanged for the most part since they were first produced in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Step-by-step instructions for those choosing to castrate the animals themselves are readily available through hatcheries and poultry extension programs, as well as online.<sup>4</sup>

### **Capon Production**

The overwhelming majority of commercially produced chickens are strains who have been selectively bred for heavy body weight and rapid growth.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, capons are slower-growing and are marketed as “more tender, juicier, and more flavorful than regular [intact] chicken[s],”<sup>6</sup> typically appealing to gourmards and “certain ethnic communities.”<sup>7</sup> Commercial capon production in the United States is limited to one major company, Wapsie Produce, Inc., “America’s largest producer and marketer of capons,”<sup>8</sup> which is comprised of an Iowa processor and growers in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota.<sup>9</sup>

Caponization is also practiced by an unknown number of small, backyard producers and hobbyists. Small flock owners who obtain both male and female chicks of breeds selected for egg production have little use for the young cockerels as they are unable to lay eggs, so they may be castrated and reared to be sold as capons.

Any breed of chicken can be caponized, but commercial producers use a Cornish and Plymouth Rock cross-bred bird, the same cross typically used in the broiler chicken industry. Turkeys, pheasants, and quail may also be caponized, but are not generally marketed.

Caponization may be performed when young cockerels are just ten days of age, but is usually performed when they are two to six weeks old. Commercially grown capons are typically slaughtered when they are 16 to 18 weeks old, but backyard farmers may wait until the birds are between 6 and 11 months of age. In contrast, commercially raised broiler chickens are slaughtered at just 6 weeks.

## The Surgery

Birds undergoing caponization are rarely anesthetized.<sup>10</sup> Feed and water are removed at least 12 hours prior to the castration so the intestines are not full and crowding in the abdominal cavity is minimized. In preparation for the surgery, the bird's legs and wings are stretched taut and securely fastened to a work surface.<sup>11</sup> Feathers that might obscure the procedure are pulled out. A one-inch incision is made between the last two ribs. The ribs are then spread and each testis is pulled out with a twisting motion until the bean-shaped organ breaks free of the connecting tissues.<sup>12</sup> The incision is not stitched. Practiced caponizers work very rapidly, castrating approximately 200 birds in one hour.<sup>13</sup>

Successful caponization takes skill, and complications can arise when persons with little expertise attempt the operation. The posterior vena cava runs along the bird's back and passes between the two testes. If this vein is ruptured during the surgery, the bird can bleed to death. If antiseptics or antibiotics are not used, and even in some cases when they are, infection may develop. Should the infected wound not heal properly, the capon may suffer and eventually die. A condition known as "air puffs" or "wind puffs" occurs sporadically, caused by air trapped under the skin as the wound heals. In order to correct this problem, the air is released by repeatedly inserting a sharp, pointed knife<sup>14,15</sup> or by puncturing the skin with a pair of shears.<sup>16</sup> Death during or following the surgery is not uncommon.

## Conclusion

The production of capons is undoubtedly a serious welfare concern. Scientists and veterinarians concur that birds can and do feel pain,<sup>17,18,19,20</sup> and cockerels undoubtedly suffer during caponization. The surgical procedure is vivisection, the operation performed on a fully conscious animal. Complications associated with the castration may arise, especially if the surgery is performed by untrained individuals, as is largely the case when hobbyists learn the techniques through trial and error. The capon industry and the practice of cockerel castration in the United States should be banned on animal welfare grounds as they have been in the United Kingdom.

## References

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5. For additional information, see: An HSUS Report: The Welfare of Animals in the Broiler Chicken Industry ([www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/welfare/broiler\\_industry.html](http://www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/welfare/broiler_industry.html)), An HSUS Report: Welfare Issues with Selective Breeding for Rapid Growth in Broiler Chickens and Turkeys ([www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/practices/fast\\_growth\\_broilers.html](http://www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/practices/fast_growth_broilers.html)), and An HSUS Report: The Economics of Adopting Alternative Production Practices to Genetic Selection for Rapid Growth in Poultry ([www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/economics/fast\\_growth\\_econ.html](http://www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/economics/fast_growth_econ.html)).
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