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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Euthanasia of Reptiles — Decapitation: An Inhumane Method of Slaughter for the Class "Reptilia"

DEAR SIR:

It was previously thought that decapitation was a humane method of euthanasia for reptiles. This led to recommendations for its use in at least the following publications: Ball and Bellairs (1), Cooper and Jackson (2), Frye (3) and Duphar Veterinary Limited (4). However, recent discussions between veterinary surgeons and specialists have resulted in the condemnation of this practice (5,6).

Since the recent publications did not offer a broad statement with the announcement recommending discontinuation of decapitation, a brief explanation of why this practice should be more widely condemned is as follows:

The reptilian metabolism is renowned for its ability to function at a low respiration and heart rate. It is therefore reasonable that nerve tissue is far more tolerant of a reduction in oxygen supply than, for example, mammals and can withstand compara-

tively long periods of induced hypotension and anoxia. One hears of anecdotal accounts where snakes and lizards indicate consciousness following decapitation, as the head may be seen to react to an approach by attempting to defend itself, respond to touch with movement and respond to light with pupil dilation and contraction. Klauber (7) was one of the first to document such reactions as much as 59 minutes after decapitation. However, he made no conclusions regarding the 13 rattlesnakes, used in his experiments, ability to feel pain.

It has been suggested that such a high transection of the spinal cord would induce rapid and sufficient neurogenic shock to incapacitate normal central nervous system functions and reduce or eliminate sensitivity to pain. For various reasons it would be irresponsible for anyone to offer approval on this point alone as the duration and type of reactions suggest that the "shock" effect is insufficient to reduce awareness significantly.

CLIFFORD WARWICK
36 Beech Avenue
Drakes Broughton
Pershore, Worcs WR10 2JB
England

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Editor's Note

Methods for humanely killing reptilia are being considered by the Scientific Advisory Panel of the World Society for the Protection of Animals. Further information may be obtained from Mr. Colin Platt, Coordinator, Scientific Advisory Panel, WSPA, 106 Jermyn Street, London, SW1Y 6EE, United Kingdom.