Male pre- and post-pubertal castration effect on live weight, components of empty body weight, estimated nitrogen excretion and efficiency in Piemontese hypertrophic cattle

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Abstract

To evaluate the effect of sexual neutering and age of castration on empty body weight (EBW) components and estimated nitrogen excretion and efficiency, a trial was carried out on 3 groups of double-muscled Piemontese calves: early castrated (EC, 5th month of age), late castrated (LC, 12th month of age) and intact males (IM, control group). Animals were fed at the same energy and protein level and slaughtered at 18th month of age. Live and slaughtering performances and EBW components were recorded, whereas N excretion was calculated by difference between diet and weight gain N content. In live and slaughtering performances, IM showed higher final, carcass and total meat weight than EC and LC (P<0.01). In EBW components, IM showed higher blood and head weight than EC and LC (P<0.01 and 0.05 respectively), and differences were found between EC and LC for head weights (P<0.01). IM showed higher body crude protein (BCP) than EC and LC (P<0.01 and 0.05 respectively), but BCP/EBW ratio was higher only in IM than EC (P<0.05). Estimated N daily gain was higher in IM than EC and LC (P<0.01). Only LC showed higher excretion than IM (P<0.05), and N efficiency was higher in IM than EC and LC (P<0.05 and 0.01 respectively). In conclusion, for the Piemontese hypertrophied cattle castration significantly increases N excretion (+7%) and reduces N efficiency (-15%), leading to a lower level of sustainability.

Materials and methods

The trial was carried out on 24 hypertrophied Piemontese calves of the same initial age and weight (157±19 d and 162±19 kg), homogeneously divided into 3 groups according to age and weight: early castrated (EC, 5th month of age); late castrated (LC, 12th month of age), intact males (IM, control group).

Sexual neutralisation, carried out by a veterinarian according to the European and national welfare legislations (Council Directive 98/58/EC and Regulation 99/188/EC) which do not forbid the castration even in the organic livestock (European Council, 1998; 1999), was obtained after local anaesthesia by Burdzico's pincher, by pressing the scrotum and determining the spermatic and blood vessel cord interruption. This is the most diffuse technique among local farmers. In fact, this practice has little influence on steer growth capacity and behaviour (Biagini et al., 2001), particularly in young calves (Biagini and Lazzaroni, 2007).

In order to compensate the low number of heads per group, the animals were reared in straw-bedded pens (8×6.5 m each) with lock-in stanchion, under the same environmental conditions to reach the statistical reliability required (power of the experiment = 0.95). The cattle were reared for an average of 405±9 days and fed for a daily weight gain of 1.2 kg with hay (2 kg/day) and with an increasing but rationed amount of concentrate (similar for all groups) to meet the energy and protein requirements, according to the INRA scheme for bulls of late maturing beef breeds (Garcia et al., 2007). In the trial, a two-phase feeding system was used. The concentrate (0.95 UFV/kg) for the growing period (7 months) was made up of maize (45%), barley (17%), soy bean meal (18%), bran (14%), carob (Ceratonia siliqua fruits; 3%), minerals and additives (3%), and for the finishing period (6 months) of maize (60%), barley (15%), soy bean meal (10%), bran (9%), carob (2%) and minerals and additives (4%). Feed characteristics are reported in Table 1.

During the trial, the individual feed intake was recorded, as well as the individual live weights at the beginning (one day before EC group calves castration, 5th month of age), at the middle (one day before LC group calves castration, 12th month of age), and at the end of the trial (one day before slaughtering, 18th...
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The relationship between EBW\textsuperscript{18} and BCP in Piemontese EC, LC and IM was calculated with a linear regression equation (SPSS, 1999).

Results

The evolution of live weight and the average daily feed intake for all animals are reported in Table 2. The effect of sexual neutralisation started to be evident at the middle of the trial (12th month), when LC showed higher live weight than EC (P<0.05), and increased at the end of the trial, when the live weight was higher in IM than EC and LC (P<0.01).

The weight gain was different before and after sexual neutralization as shown by the linear regression coefficient between cattle age (months) and live weight (kg), which in the 1st period were 27.38, 31.67 (+16%) and 32.06 (+17%) in EC, LC and IM respectively, and in the 2nd period 25.59, 21.67 (-15%) and 31.78 (+24%) again in EC, LC and IM respectively.

The non-carcass and carcass-dissected component weights are shown in Table 3. Differences were recorded between EC and LC only for head weight (P<0.05). The IM showed higher non-carcass component weight than EC and LC for blood (P<0.01 and P<0.05, respectively) and for head weight (P<0.01). The IM also has higher hide weight than EC (P<0.01).

EC and LC showed lower total meat weight

Table 1. Chemical composition of feedstuffs used in growing and finishing period.

| Growing period | Finishing period |
|----------------|------------------|
| **Concentrate** | **Hay**          |
| **Concentrate** | **Hay**          |
| DM, % | 87.81 | 87.50 | 87.61 | 87.50 |
| CP, % DM | 17.76 | 9.00 | 14.43 | 9.00 |
| N, % DM | 2.84 | 1.44 | 2.31 | 1.44 |
| Hay | 9.00 | 14.43 | 9.00 |
| CP, % DM | 9.00 | 9.00 |
| N, % DM | 1.44 | 1.44 |

DM, dry matter; CP, crude protein; N, nitrogen.

Table 2. Live weight, average daily weight gain and feed intake in early castrated, late castrated and intact Piemontese male cattle (mean ± standard error).

| Month | EC | LC | IM |
|-------|----|----|----|
| 5th | 163.7±8.3 | 167.2±5.7 | 156.1±6.5 |
| 12th | 379.0±7.0 | 416.7±8.9 | 405.6±12.6 |
| 18th | 526.7±12.2 | 539.0±12.4 | 589.2±14.7 |
| ADG | 0.96±0.05 | 1.11±0.04 | 1.11±0.04 |
| ADG 12-18th month | 0.81±0.06 | 0.68±0.06 | 1.02±0.03 |
| 5-12th month concentrate consumption, kg/d | 4.2±0.3 | 4.4±0.4 | 4.3±0.4 |
| 12-18th month hay consumption, kg/d | 1.8±0.0 | 1.8±0.0 | 1.8±0.0 |
| 5-12th month concentrate consumption, kg/d | 6.4±0.3 | 6.7±0.3 | 6.8±0.3 |
| 12-18th month hay consumption, kg/d | 1.9±0.0 | 1.9±0.0 | 1.9±0.0 |
| 5-12th month concentrate consumption, kg/d | 5.3±0.4 | 5.5±0.4 | 5.5±0.4 |
| 12-18th month hay consumption, kg/d | 1.8±0.0 | 1.8±0.0 | 1.8±0.0 |

ADG, average daily weight gain; EC, early castrated; LC, late castrated; IM, intact males; *P<0.05; **P<0.01.
(P<0.01) and higher total fat weight (P<0.01) than IM. Instead, no significant differences were found in total bone weight even if, once again, it seems to be higher in IM than EC and LC. These differences also influenced the carcass weight, which was higher in IM than EC and LC (P<0.01). Body component weight was used to calculate the aEBW (Table 3), higher in IM than EC and LC (P<0.01). Instead, the aEBW/SBW ratio for EC, LC and IM showed no significant differences between groups, and the average ratio for all the tested animals was 0.890, similar to that proposed by the National Research Council (1996), assuming the equation to be reliability for the Piemontese hyper trophyed cattle. Based on these results, the EBW5, EBW12 and EBW18 were calculated to estimate nitrogen excretion. No differences were found between the tested groups in EBW5, but only in EBW12 higher in LC than EC (P<0.05), and in EBW18 higher in IM than EC (P<0.01) and LC (P<0.05). Similarly, the absolute BCP content was also higher in IM than EC (P<0.01) and LC (P<0.05), however the percentage ratio between BCP and EBW18 only showed a higher value in IM than EC (P<0.05). Comparison between the empty body components showed a higher percentage for head plus hide and shanks in LC and IM than EC (P<0.05), as well as gastrointestinal tract in EC and LC than IM (P<0.01) and carcass in EC than LC (P<0.05), whereas no differences were found for visceral organs plus blood.

Differences appear in average N in daily diet (Table 4), appraised in accordance with the Simpfendorfer equation (National Research Council, 1996). Castration reduced the N daily gain in steers for all the considered trial periods. In fact, EC showed lower values than LC and IM (P<0.05) between 5th and 12th month of age, as well as EC and LC showed lower values than IM (P<0.01) between the 12th and 18th month. Consequently, also the whole period N daily gain was lower in EC and LC than IM (P<0.01). Analysing the N daily excretion, no differences were found in the 1st period, but only in the 2nd ones when the considered parameter was higher in LC than EC and IM (P<0.01). On the other hand, considering the whole period, only LC showed higher N daily excretion than IM (P<0.05).

As showed in Table 4 N efficiency was higher in IM and LC than EC (P<0.05) in the 5-12th month period and higher in IM than EC (P<0.05) and LC (P<0.01) in the 12-18th month period. In the latter, EC also showed higher N efficiency than LC (P<0.05) whereas IM showed higher N efficiency than EC (P<0.05) and LC (P<0.01) for the whole fattening period.

Relationships between EBW (kg) and BCP (kg) was calculated, giving the following linear regression equations:

EC: BCP = 0.2251 EBW18 - 10.6498 (R²=0.992)
LC: BCP = 0.1939 EBW18 + 5.4245 (R²=0.977)
IM: BCP = 0.1991 EBW18 + 3.6419 (R²=0.997)

Discussion

Sexual neutralisation, and the consequent reduction of the androgen hormones effect, leads calves not only to a lower live weight, but also to an intermediate morphological type, with a body conformation intermediate between male and female aspects (Lazzaroni et al., 2002) and consequently with peculiarity in body conformation and differences in body components. In fact, castration affects the masculine somatic characteristics (secondary sexual traits) and calves assume a neutral morphological type owing to a reduced development of fore body muscles (Biagini and Lazzaroni, 2007). IM showed a higher muscle development, affecting the carcass weight, and a lower fat deposit than EC and LC.

Table 3. Empty body fractions, actual empty body weight, empty body weight/shrunk body weight ratio, empty body weight at different age and body crude protein in early castrated, late castrated and intact males Piemontese male cattle (mean ± standard error).

|                  | EC          | LC          | IM          |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Carcass, kg      | 356.5±10.7b| 356.6±7.0b  | 397.7±11.0b |
| Total meat, kg   | 291.4±9.3a | 290.7±4.8a  | 333.9±9.7a  |
| Total fat, kg    | 18.7±1.4a  | 16.3±0.9a   | 10.6±0.6a   |
| Total bones, kg  | 48.4±1.5   | 49.6±2.0    | 53.2±1.8    |
| Blood, kg        | 13.1±0.3ab | 13.4±0.3ab  | 14.7±0.4ab  |
| Head, kg         | 21.0±0.4ab | 22.9±0.6ab  | 25.4±0.5ab  |
| Shanks, kg       | 9.7±0.3    | 9.9±0.3     | 9.9±0.3     |
| Hide, kg         | 27.0±2.4   | 32.1±1.1ab  | 37.6±1.4    |
| Empty rumen, kg  | 10.7±0.9   | 11.0±0.5    | 9.6±0.4     |
| Empty stomachs and guts, kg | 15.8±0.7 | 16.3±0.6 | 15.2±0.6 |
| Offal, kg        | 15.4±0.2   | 15.5±0.7    | 15.0±0.4    |
| aEBW, kg         | 469.3±13.1b| 478.0±9.4b  | 525.2±12.8b |
| aEBW/SBW, kg     | 0.890±0.009| 0.887±0.004| 0.891±0.004 |
| EBW5, kg         | 145.9±7.4  | 149.0±5.1   | 139.1±5.0   |
| EBW12, kg        | 337.7±6.2a | 371.3±11.2a | 361.4±7.9a  |
| EBW18, kg        | 469.3±10.8b| 482.0±11.11b| 525.6±13.1b |
| BCP, kg          | 55.1±3.0ab | 98.1±2.5ab  | 102.8±1.8a  |
| BCP/EBW18, %     | 19.46±0.67 | 20.00±0.48b | 22.06±0.60  |
| Relative empty body fraction |             |             |             |
| Visceral organs + blood, % | 6.11±0.15 | 6.06±0.12 | 5.78±0.04 |
| Head, hide and shanks, % | 12.28±0.32 | 13.62±0.32 | 13.80±0.38 |
| Gastrointestinal tract, % | 5.66±0.23 | 5.71±0.15 | 4.73±0.08 |
| Carcass, %       | 75.94±5.57 | 74.61±5.36  | 75.70±5.39  |

Table 4. Nitrogen average daily gain, excretion and efficiency in early castrated, late castrated and intact males Piemontese male cattle (mean ± standard error).

|                  | EC          | LC          | IM          |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| N in daily diet 5-12, g | 163±6     | 168±10     | 165±10     |
| N in daily diet 12-16, g | 154±6     | 161±8      | 163±9      |
| N in daily diet 16-18, g | 159±10    | 165±11     | 164±11     |
| N daily gain 5-12, g   | 40.6±1.8a | 47.1±1.7b  | 47.5±1.9a  |
| N daily gain 12-16, g  | 39.7±2.8a | 33.4±2.8a  | 50.8±2.0a  |
| N daily gain 16-18, g  | 40.2±2.1b | 41.4±1.7b  | 49.0±1.7b  |
| N daily excretion 5-12, g | 122.1±8 | 119.9±1.7  | 117.5±1.9  |
| N daily excretion 12-16, g | 114.1±8 | 127.8±2.8a | 121.2±2.0b |
| N daily excretion 16-18, g | 118.5±2.1a| 123.4±1.7b | 115.2±1.7b |
| N efficiency 5-12, %   | 24.95±1.12| 28.53±0.99 | 28.74±1.16 |
| N efficiency 12-16, %  | 25.83±1.85b| 20.74±1.71c| 31.19±1.25c|
| N efficiency 16-18, %  | 23.33±1.53b| 25.14±1.06b| 28.82±1.01b|

EC, early castrated; LC, late castrated; IM, intact males; aEBW, actual empty body weight; SBW, shrunk body weight; EBW, empty body weight; BCP, body crude protein; *P<0.05; **P<0.01.

Biagini and Lazzaroni 2007; Lazzaroni, 2007). The IM showed a higher muscle development, affecting the carcass weight, and a lower fat deposit than EC and LC.
probably due to the masculine hormones effect (particularly testosterone) on muscle protein anabolism (Morgan et al., 1993). On the contrary, sexual neutralisation determines a lower muscle thickness and a higher peri-muscular and sub-cutaneous fat deposition and infiltration into muscular tissue, the latter being due to thyroid insufficiency and consequently oxidative process slowdown. Furthermore, bone growth is also modified in steers vs. bulls, above all the head and limb long bones showing a different or a prolonged growth. However, these differences could be pointed out only at the end of the growing period. Therefore, in our trial the recorded differences in head weight might be due to sexual neutralization. The differences recorded in the empty body components, as well as in blood and hide weights, between the three tested groups partially modify the N retention and utilisation efficiency.

Several physiological factors influence nitrogen utilisation efficiency and thus the live weight gain in growing animals. Analysing the live weight and feed intake in the three studied experimental groups, the IM showed higher efficiency in feed conversion rate, since intake did not change in the three experimental groups. These data are in accordance with results obtained by Solanas et al. (2005), who found statistic differences in the final weight but not in total DM intake of Friesian calves. The effect of castration on live weight was evident after puberty and increased with age (Bretschnieder, 2005). In fact, after few weeks from the sexual neutralization the observed differences were between the not yet castrated LC and EC, however, at the end of the trial, IM showed higher live weight than EC and LC, with higher significance and LC showed the worst live performance compared to the other groups. As shown by carcass components, the differences recorded in live weight were imputable to a different growth ratio between meat and fat tissues, then in N gain, higher in IM than in EC and LC. This affects the efficiency of feedstuffs conversion into saleable animal products, above all into protein products, averaging only 20-30% for meat production in growing cattle (Wessels and Titgemeyer, 1997), and the well-known high energetic cost of protein synthesis (15-20 MJ per kg of protein synthesized in accordance with the species; Lobley, 2003).

Moreover, the different physiological response of each animal to castration stress and the influence of castration age, which affect live weight gain in the subsequent weeks, influenced feeding efficiency as well as N excretion, particularly higher in LC than EC and IM in the 2nd period. The sudden changes of the N excretion might affect manure composition, increasing the potential environmental impact (N loss and conversion of urea to ammonia and its subsequent volatilization that modified N/P ratio below plant requirements; Firkins and Reynolds, 2005).

In our trial, Piemontese steers and bulls might consume approximately 1 kg/d of apparent digestible crude protein (N × 6.25), but retain approximately 0.25 and 0.30 kg/d respectively (both about 28% of daily weight gain). Lobley (2003) has found that it achieves 2.7 kg/d in finishing beef steers, i.e. about 3% of total body protein. The direct mechanism by which castration alters protein turnover remain unclear, nevertheless, this practice influences endogenous proteinase activity and myofibrillar protein turnover. Morgan et al. (1993), comparing bulls and steers, have found that intact males were heavier and more efficient in feed conversion, besides having higher calpastatin and cystatin muscle activity and excreting less N-methylhistidine. Moreover, they displayed lower fractional degradation rates. Comparing the relative body components of empty body weight found in our trial with other breeds, Piemontese cattle showed higher carcass weight, lower weights as regards head plus hide and shank, visceral organs plus blood and gastrointestinal tract than 14 month old Hereford, Charolais and Simmental heifers (Buckley et al., 1990). Furthermore, Piemontese cattle have a prevalence of higher protein tissue content with potential consequences on N efficiency. On the other hand, the studied animals showed similar ratios with Marchigiana steers and bulls (Mantovani, 1961).

Data analysis of carcass and carcass components showed opposite and predictable differences between the two groups of steers (EC and LC) and IM. In fact, possibly as a result of masculine hormones effect on muscle protein anabolism (Morgan et al., 1993), muscle thickness and fat deposition.

Comparing the relationship between EBW and BCP in other breeds, at the same EBW Piemontese cattle showed higher BCP than Angus and Holstein non-double muscled bulls and steers (National Research Council, 1996), and then different N efficiency and requirements. The difference in N efficiency is also due to the higher feed efficiency in double-muscled animals (Menissier, 1982; Michaux et al., 1982) with lower feed intake and higher growth rate (Hanet et al., 1989; Clinquart et al., 1995; Keane, 2009).

These findings suggest that hypertrophied Piemontese steers and bulls required more attention as to the N, protein and energy supply. In particular, it is well known that optimising ruminal fermentation and providing high quality sources of abomasal amino acids could significantly increase nitrogen balance and protein accretion. Moreover, the different ratio between muscle and others carcass and non-carcass parts that characterise hypertrophied cattle could increase N efficiency, so as castration modifies calf behaviour and physiology, as well as the protein metabolism, thus inevitably limiting the maximal efficiency that could be achieved.

Conclusions

Considering the peculiarity of the Piemontese hypertrophied cattle, this trial examined the effect, not yet widely studied, of sexual neutralization and age of castration on Piemontese double muscled calves (practice recently used again to obtain high quality meat used for local, typical and traditional productions) first on empty body components (no data are available for Piemontese hypertrophied bulls and steers) and then the consequences on the nitrogen excretion and efficiency of intact, pre- and post-pubertal castrated males. The trial showed that both pre- and post-pubertal castration of Piemontese calves reduce the muscle tissue synthesis, increase the fat deposition and modify the weight of some body components affecting the N retention under the same feeding conditions, getting worse N daily gain and then N efficiency. The differences among pre- and post-pubertal castration groups showed that would be preferable to conduct early castration rather than delaying the procedure.

These results confirm how accuracy of the protein really intake and prediction on its retention is fundamental to assume different strategies for N excretion reduction in accordance with the specific head characteristics. Particularly it is possible modify protein and energy supply splitting the herd in homogeneous groups using several criteria including gender.

In conclusion the trial showed as the management strategies could have different environmental effects on the level of sustainability and confirm how the increasing attention given to animal production for these aspects imposes an appropriate evaluation of the different productive processes.
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