Post Op considerations

Hemorrhage is the most common possible complication. If a “bleeder” persists, the operator should check again for an artery to be pulled or ligated. A tourniquet can be applied. To give the clot a matrix on which to form, padding such as cotton can be pressed on the wound and left until it falls off. Bloodstop powders, mainly astringents, can be applied to the bleeding areas as well. Other powders that have been used include flour and corn starch. Dressings in the sinus should be avoided as they can be irritating and delay healing. In yesteryear, farmers applied cobwebs from the barn ceiling for the same purpose. With any form of dehorning, the seal that forms can be prematurely knocked off; occasionally exposing a bleeder that warrants attention. Cautery from a thermal-type dehorner can be used for hemostasis.

Infection is a serious complication, although it is rare with proper technique. Affected cattle are generally febrile, lethargic, inappetent, and may have a malodorous discharge from the site. The resultant acute sinusitis needs to be drained by opening the dehorning site, flushing it copiously with a disinfectant, and tipping the head to drain it on a daily basis until it dries up and drainage ceases. Occasionally, systemic antibiotics may be needed. Sometimes sinusitis may become chronic, which is best treated by trephination and lavage, administration of topical and systemic antibiotics, and analgesics. If drainage persists, osteomyelitis and bone sequestrum may be the cause of a chronic condition. Surgical curettage of the affected area is performed. These chronic sinus infections can be difficult, if not impossible, to clear up. For these reasons, the surgery should not be done in rainy, dusty conditions or during fly season. If dehorning occurs during fly season, appropriate fly control measures should be instituted, particularly in screw worm–endemic areas. Maggot infestation is handled as in sinusitis.

Another complication of dehorning, especially with the large cutting instruments, is a fractured skull, which can generally be avoided by keeping guillotine blades sharp.

Ketoprofen and other NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) have been tried as an aid to reduce stress. One trial that used oral ketoprofen before dehorning and at 2 and 7 hours after dehorning showed reduced levels of behavioral responses to pain compared to the control group (Faulkner and Weary, 2000). The administration of an oral medication three times per day along with xylazine, cornual nerve block, and ring block employed in this study may be difficult to implement given the typical management on United States dairy operations. Note that these drugs are not approved in the United States for this purpose in cattle, but they could be employed under AMDUCA and/or approved in the future.