Partitioning of limiting protein and energy in the growing pig: description of the problem, possible rules and their qualitative evaluation

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(Received 7 May 2004 – Revised 30 September 2004 – Accepted 11 October 2004)

A core part of any animal growth model is how it predicts the partitioning of dietary protein and energy to protein and lipid retention for different genotypes at different degrees of maturity. Rules of partitioning need to be combined with protein and energy systems to make predictions. The animal needs describing in relation to its genotype, live weight and, possibly, body composition. Some existing partitioning rules will apply over rather narrow ranges of food composition, animal and environment. Ideally, a rule would apply over the whole of the possible experimental space (scope). The live weight range over which it will apply should at least extend beyond the ‘slaughter weight range’, and ideally would include the period from the start of feeding through to maturity. Solutions proposed in the literature to the partitioning problem are described in detail and criticised in relation to their scope, generality and economy of parameters. They all raise the issue, at least implicitly, of the factors that affect the net marginal efficiency of using absorbed dietary protein for protein retention. This is identified as the crucial problem to solve. A problem identified as important is whether the effects of animal and food composition variables are independent of each other or not. Of the rules in the literature, several could be rejected on qualitative grounds. Those rules that survived were taken forward for further critical and quantitative analysis in the companion paper. (Sandberg et al. 2005)

Swine: Growth: Partitioning: Protein: Energy

It is useful to see nutrient partitioning as the distribution of absorbed protein and energy, the only resources considered here, from an ingested food between protein and lipid retention, once the requirements for maintenance have been met. This is so both for models where food intake is considered as an input and those where food intake is a predicted outcome (Black et al. 1986; Emmans & Kyriazakis, 1997; van Milgen & Noblet, 1999). Even an animal fed ad libitum may still be limited in resources. Environmental constraints such as high temperatures (Campbell & Taverner, 1988; Collin et al. 2001) or feed factors such as bulk (Kyriazakis & Emmans, 1995) may prevent the animal from attaining the food intake needed for achieving potential growth. Emmans & Fisher (1986) recognised that to understand the partitioning of scarce resources, the composition of the food partitioned and the animal within which partitioning occurs, both need sufficient descriptions. In agreement with this view, Black et al. (1986) stated that ‘a full understanding of the animal’s response to variations in dietary conditions is required’ in order to solve the problem of predicting performance.

The actual intakes of protein and energy will affect the rate of protein retention, which may be below its upper limit, PRmax, set by the genotype and the state of the animal (Black et al. 1995; Schinckel & de Lange, 1996; Whittemore & Green, 2002; Wellock et al. 2004). Inevitably, intakes will also affect the rate of lipid retention. Rules of partitioning allow the prediction of the actual rates of both protein and lipid retention given the supply of ingested protein and energy. Combining partitioning rules with protein and energy systems allows the prediction of actual rates of protein and lipid retention.

An optimistic assumption is that general rules exist that govern the partitioning of scarce resources (Ferguson et al. 1994; Emmans & Kyriazakis, 1997). A different view is that both the kind of pig, and the state that it is in, will affect the partitioning of scarce resources (Fuller & Crofts, 1977; de Greef & Verstegen, 1995; Fuller et al. 1995). This is equivalent to saying that there are no general rules. Black et al. (1986) and van Milgen & Noblet (1999) propose the intermediate view that there are differences between genotypes and a general systematic effect of live weight.

The problem of nutrient partitioning in growing pigs has been considered in the reviews of Black & de Lange (1995), Susenbeth (1995), Emmans & Kyriazakis (1997), Whittemore et al. (2001), Moughan (2003a) and van Milgen & Noblet (2003). In no case, were all of

Abbreviations: L, mass of lipid; P, mass of protein; PR, protein retention.

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the proposed solutions described, contrasted and criticised both conceptually and against experimental data in the literature. As well as these reviews, the recent partitioning models proposed by Green & Whittemore (2003), van Milgen & Noblet (1999) and van Milgen et al. (2000) are considered here. There is no general agreement on what the rules of partitioning are. We describe first the solutions in the literature and then their ability to solve the partitioning problem is qualitatively assessed. A solution to the problem of partitioning as conventionally posed is needed before more complex situations, such as disease (Lochmiller & Deerenberg, 2000; Coop & Kyriazakis, 2001; Houdijk et al. 2001; Powanda & Beisel, 2003), can be properly considered. In a second accompanying paper we assemble and use a comprehensive and suitable set of data from the literature to evaluate quantitatively the various proposed rules (Sandberg et al. 2005).

**Partitioning rules**

*The scope of the proposed rules*

Any rule of scarce resource partitioning will operate over some range of inputs that may include food, animal and environmental variables. Descriptions of these inputs will therefore be required. These three classes of variables are considered in turn.

**Food variables.** The level of feeding can be between zero and *ad libitum*. Any rule should cover as much of the range as is possible. While force-feeding is possible it is not considered further here. The assumption usually made, for simplicity, is that no components of the food other than its protein and energy contents are affecting growth (Black et al. 1986; Whittemore, 1995). The protein and energy dimensions need clear descriptions that are sufficient for the proposed rule to be implemented.

Possible components of the description of the protein content of a food include the crude protein content (*CPC*, kg/kg) and its digestibility that may be apparent (*dₐ*) or ileal (*dᵢ*), (Moughan, 2003b). The proportion of protein that is ‘ideal’ (*v*), in relation to a chosen reference protein is relevant (Fuller et al. 1989; Wang & Fuller, 1989). If the efficiency of retaining the first limiting amino acid differs between amino acids then the first limiting amino acid in the protein also needs to be known.

An energy content of the food (MJ/kg) is needed to turn a food allowance (kg/d) into an energy allowance (MJ/d). There are different solutions to this problem. Whittemore (1983) proposed using digestible energy, *DE*, with correction for the protein content of the food. van Milgen & Noblet (1999) used metabolisable energy, *ME*. Noblet et al. (1994) proposed that net energy, *NE*, could be used. Emmans (1994) proposed a scale called effective energy, *EE*, while Birkett & de Lange (2001a,b,c) used the ‘explicit material flow of ATP’.

**Animal variables.** Partitioning rules intended to operate across kinds and states of pig need to include adequate descriptions of the animal. The dimensions of the description will include genotype and current state. A sufficient description of current state could include the degree of maturity either as live weight (van Milgen & Noblet, 1999) or as protein weight (Whittemore & Fawcett, 1976; Whittemore, 1983; Emmans & Fisher, 1986). The description may also include the fatness of the animal and its age. Where live weight is the only state variable used, differences in body protein and lipid proportions cannot be dealt with. Knap et al. (2002) proposed that a reasonable body weight range to use would be 10–175 kg; ideally, the range would be from birth to maturity to cover all free-feeding pigs. Pre-natal partitioning of nutrients is not normally considered (Wellok et al. 2004).

**Environment variables.** Any partitioning rule would optimistically have adequate conceptual descriptions of how environmental factors may affect rules of partitioning. Partitioning rules often assume that there are either no environmental effects or, in the case of thermoregulation or activity, that the additional energy requirements can be added to maintenance (Whittemore & Fawcett, 1976; Black et al. 1986; Wellok et al. 2003).

### Proposed rules of nutrient partitioning

Rules of partitioning found in the literature are presented in roughly chronological order.

*Rule 1.* Whittemore & Fawcett (1974) made protein retention (*PR*) a function of the crude protein content of the food (*CPC*, kg/kg) and food intake (*FI*, kg/d). They made the gross efficiency with which crude protein intake was retained, *Z*, dependent on live weight (*W*, kg) through the general constants *p*, *k* and *f*:

\[
PR = FI \times CPC \times Z \quad (kg/d)
\]

\[
Z = p + k \times \exp(-fW) \quad (2)
\]

An upper limit to *PR*, here called *PR*ₘₐₓ, was a characteristic of the kind of pig but was independent of *W*. The amount of energy available after meeting maintenance and that needed for *PR* went to *LR* (lipid retention). The model was assumed to apply for dietary crude protein contents between 120 and 280 g crude protein/kg and 20 < *W* < 100 kg. No other limits were stated.

*Rule 2a.* Whittemore & Fawcett (1976) proposed an alternative expression for *PR* and set a minimum for the ratio of lipid to protein in the gain. Protein retention was predicted from the ideal protein supply (*IP*, g/d) as the product of *FI*, *CPC*, *dᵢ* and the biological value of the protein, *v*, equations (8) and (12) in their paper lead to:

\[
PR = IP/(1 - \phi) + (\phi/(s \times (1 - u))) \quad (g/d)
\]

The value of *u* = *P/Pₘₐₓ* is the degree of maturity in protein, where *P* is the current protein weight and *Pₘₐₓ* is the mature protein weight. The parameters, *ϕ* = 0.06 and *s* = 0.23 were assumed to be constant across genotypes and degrees of maturity. Equation (3) makes the gross efficiency of using *IP* decrease as *u* increases. The gross efficiency is independent of *IP* at a given value of *u*. There are no effects of genotype other than on *PR*ₘₐₓ as in Rule 1. The value of *LR* is calculated on energy grounds as in Rule 1, but now any demand for cold thermogenesis is met first. A further condition is that a minimum is set for the ratio of lipid to protein in the gain (*LR* : *PR*)ₜₘᵦ. This
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condition means that the value of LR cannot fall below 
\((LR:PR)_{\text{min}} \times PR\).

The rules used by Moughan et al. (1987) and de Lange (1995) are essentially the same as those proposed by Whitemore & Fawcett (1976). The scope is the same as that of Rule 1 other than allowing the environment to be cold and food protein to vary in quality.

Rule 2b. Whitemore (1995) recognised that setting a minimum ratio of lipid to protein in the gain was an unsatisfactory concept. He proposed two other ratios instead. The first was a ‘preferred’ value for the ratio of the mass of lipid \((L)\) to that of protein \((P)\) in the body called \((L:P)_{\text{pref}}\). The second was a minimum value for this ratio \((L:P)_{\text{min}}\). The variable \((L:P)_{\text{min}}\) was proposed to ‘ensure some level of fatness in the body’ and ‘to prevent undue use of \(L\) for the support of \(PR\)’. A value of 0.5 was proposed for \((L:P)_{\text{min}}\). The value for \((L:P)_{\text{pref}}\) was believed to be genotype- and sex-specific. It was not clear whether it varied as the pig grew. When \((L:P) > (L:P)_{\text{min}}\) then the model allows for lipid loss.

Rule 3. Fuller & Crofts (1977) presented an equation that related the scaled nitrogen retention to the protein and starch contents of the food. Differentiation of their equation (9) gives (4). The response in nitrogen retention \((NR, \text{g/kg body weight}^{0.73} \text{ per d})\) per unit starch intake \((S, \text{g/kg body weight}^{0.73} \text{ per d})\) was related to the intakes of both starch and nitrogen through:

\[
dNR/dS = \varepsilon \times \exp(-q) \times ((1 - A \times \exp(-r N))
\]

where \(N\) is the scaled nitrogen intake (\(\text{g/kg body weight}^{0.73}\) per d) and \(\varepsilon, q, A\) and \(r\) are parameters. The values of the parameters, and hence the efficiency of protein utilisation, were said to depend on animal factors including genotype, sex, age and nutritional history.

Rule 4. Black et al. (1986) proposed that protein retention was a linear function of metabolisable energy intake \((MEI, \text{MJ/d})\) when \(MEI\) was less than that required for \(PR_{\text{max}}\). The equations presented were equivalent to:

\[
PR = b \times (MEI - (c \times MEI_m)) \quad (\text{g/d})
\]

where \(MEI_m\) is the amount of metabolisable energy needed for maintenance. The rate of response, \(b\), depended on \(W\) through (6). The values of the parameters \(n (0.7), y (-0.0192)\) and \(z (0.65)\) were assumed constant across genotypes, sexes, environments and degrees of maturity. Their biological meaning, if any, is not clear. The parameter \(c\) is discussed below. The value of \(MEI_m\) depended only on genotype ranging from 0.68 to 1.2. The value of \(LR\) was calculated on the grounds of energy balance.

Equation 6 was modified by NRC (1998) to include the effects of different values of the parameter called MPAR, the ‘mean protein accretion rate over the range of 20 to 120 kg \(W\) and ambient temperature \(T\). In addition, the parameters of equation 6 are now related to digestible energy intake, \(DEI (\text{MJ/d})\), rather than \(MEI\) (hence \(b'\) rather than \(b\)). The revised equation is:

\[
b' = ((17.5 \exp(-0.0192 \ W)) + 16.25) \times (MPAR/125) \\
\times (1 + (0.015(20 - T))) (\text{g/MJ DE})
\]

\[
PR = e_P \times (IP - IP_m) \quad (\text{g/d})
\]

\[
e_P = \mu \times (\text{MEC/DCPC})
\]

\[
PR = a + b' \times DEI \quad (\text{g/d})
\]

\[
LR = c + d \times DEI \quad (\text{g/d})
\]

\[
PR = k_p \times X_i \times (ME - ME_m) \quad (\text{g/d})
\]

\[
LR = k_1 \times (1 - X_i) \times (ME - ME_m) \quad (\text{g/d})
\]

\[
X_i = c_1 + d_i \times (W - 20)
\]
The energetic efficiencies with which metabolisable energy is used for protein and lipid retention are \( k_p \) and \( k_l \) and these may be affected by the nutrient source (van Milgen et al. 2000), although it has not been stated how. The values of these two parameters are assumed constant across genotypes and live weights. It is further assumed that at maintenance no protein or lipid is either retained or lost.

**Rule 7b.** The model defined by Rule 7a was modified by van Milgen et al. (2000) to produce Rule 7b. In this model, the parameters that determine the rates of retention of protein and lipid are \( k_p, k_l, ME_m, PR_{max} \) and a new parameter, \( F \). \( F \) was defined as the \((MEI/ME_m)\) value at which \( PR = PR_{max} \). The full set of equations proposed in the Appendix of van Milgen et al. (2000) is complex and the equations are not reproduced here. The authors used a set of parameters, different from that used for Rule 7a, for estimation from an extensive set of data on three kinds of pig. The set included \( k_p, k_l \) and \( ME_m \) as before. The additional parameters were: \( PR_{max} \) at both 100 and 150 d of age, \( B \) (the Gompertz growth rate parameter), \( F_{opt} \) (\( MEI \) as a multiple of \( ME_m \) required to attain \( PR_{max} \) at 100 kg of body weight) and \( dF \) (the change in \( F \) due to a change of 1 kg in body weight). A consequence of the change from Rule 7a to Rule 7b is that \( PR \) and \( LR \) are now both curvilinear functions of \( MEI \) until \( PR = PR_{max} \), rather than linear ones.

**Qualitative assessment of proposed rules**

In this section, the rules will be challenged in turn to identify any conceptual weaknesses. The intention is to identify those areas where rejection is not possible on qualitative grounds. Reasons for qualitative rejection include: dietary protein is not considered in the energy only models; food protein is inadequately described; lipid loss is not possible; the values of many parameters are needed. A partitioning rule that has fewer parameters is preferred to one with more, other things being equal. This is a version of the criterion widely used in science called Occam’s Razor (Forster, 2000). Where the number of parameters is large a rule will set a minimum value for the ratio of lipid to protein in the body, are shown in Fig. 1.

Green & Whittmore (2003) raised an important issue: what is the maximum rate of lipid loss that an animal could undergo at the expense of growing body protein, before protein retention would become penalised in some way? It is widely recognised (Black, 1974; Whittmore, 1995; Emmans & Kyriazakis, 1997; van Milgen & Noblet, 2003) that pigs may lose lipid, while gaining protein. van Milgen & Noblet (2003) stated that the pig is prepared to lose lipid for only a short period of time but do not state what this is. Wellock et al. (2003), and Whittmore (1995), set a minimum value for the ratio of protein to lipid in the body. A necessary consequence is that lipid can be lost only when the ratio of \( L/P \) exceeds this minimum. Black et al. (1986) also recognised that pigs might not want to lose lipid ‘indefinitely’. Where a model allows lipid to be lost, which is necessary, it should also set a minimum value for the ratio of \( L/P \).

Rule 3 considers the protein and the energy, as starch, supplied by the diet, but it does not clearly account for...
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The marginal ratio in Rule 6 has, along with Fuller & Crofts (1977), a high parameter requirement. No systematic relationship between the values of the parameters and live weight is proposed. The rule also only deals with the protein content of the food in a way that is poorly defined (see de Greef & Verstegen, 1995). Figure 2 illustrates the concept of the marginal ratio, and is typical of a linear plateau system. It is not possible using Rule 6 to predict whether particular foods or food allowances would be limiting in protein. For this reason, it is not considered further.

Rule 7a predicts that an animal eating an allowance that provides MEI that equals its maintenance requirement for energy does not lose or gain any lipid or protein. This is inconsistent with the observation that animals often lose lipid at substantial rates while gaining protein (e.g. Dividich et al. 1980; ARC, 1981). The rule does not consider protein supply explicitly. The values of the parameters $c_i$ and $d_i$, which depend on genotype and sex, are used to relate $X_i$, the partitioning parameter (Equations 13 and 14) to $W$. The relationship between $X_i$ and $W$ is shown in Fig. 3 for different genotypes and sexes.

The data used to quantify Rule 7a for seven different kinds of pig came from a single level of feeding, ‘close to ad libitum’ of a single food except that two of the genotypes had some extra protein. This must limit the use of the equations in a dynamic model to predict growth for different food allowances with varying concentrations of protein and energy. As the model deals neither with the protein content of the food nor with different levels of feeding (because of the nature of the data used) it will not be discussed further.
The information needed to use the model described by van Milgen et al. (2000), here called Rule 7b, is very considerable. The response in PR and LR to MEI is now different from that shown in Fig. 2 (see Fig. 4).

To describe a kind of pig it is necessary to feed it at different levels at each of several body weights and to measure the rates of lipid and protein retention. The data collected, at least in principle, can then be analysed to yield estimates of the parameters of the model. van Milgen et al. (2000) used 145 energy and N balances to estimate the values of the twenty-seven parameters in their full model. The full model was simplified by assuming that the values of three of the parameters were the same for the three genotypes used, leading to a model with twenty-one parameters. The authors do not discuss the fit of the model nor if there were any patterns in the residuals. The values of some of the important parameters were not well estimated. The standard errors of the maintenance coefficients were 25% of the estimates themselves; the standard errors of the Gompertz growth rate parameters were 35% of the estimates of the coefficients.

The information needed to use Rule 7b for any particular genotype, existing in the future, is unlikely ever to be available. The authors state that the concepts of Rule 7b may be employed, and adapted, to deal with more complex situations, including disease. However, it would be difficult to take Rule 7b forward, partly because of the information needed and partly because the supply of protein is not explicitly considered; it is not considered further.

Conclusions


Rules 1, 2a, 7a and 7b were found to be inadequate, although on different grounds, and will not be considered further. It was not possible to reject the concepts put forward by Rules 2b, 3, 4, 5 and 6 on qualitative grounds. They all raise the issue of the factors that may affect the net marginal efficiency of protein retention. These include live weight, genotype, including sex, and the composition of the food. It is important to establish whether the effects of the animal and the food composition variables are independent of each other, or not.

The position with Rule 6 (de Greef & Verstegen, 1995) is the same in that although only four parameters need to be evaluated initially these are also said to depend on genotype and live weight. Again, an enormous amount of information is needed. As there are other rules that do not appear to have such high requirements for information Rules 3 and 6 will not be quantitatively assessed in the next paper.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council of the United Kingdom and the Scottish Executive, Environment and Rural Affairs Department. F. S. is in receipt of a BBSRC Industrial CASE studentship, supported by Sygen International Plc.

References


Fig. 4. The relationships between protein deposition (PD) and lipid deposition (LD) and metabolisable energy intake (MEI) as a multiple of that required for maintenance (MEm), as described by van Milgen et al. (2000). F is the value of MEI/MEm at which PDmax is reached.


Wang TC & Fuller MF (1989) The optimum dietary amino acid


