

A vet's eye view of the Sheep Health and Welfare Conference

By Joe Henry,
Alnorthumbria Veterinary Group



I know it shouldn't, but the word welfare in a course title does fill me with images of well-meaning but hopelessly impractical measures being talked about.

Happily this was not the case with the Sheep Health and Welfare Conference held in Staffordshire at the end of last year, where there were lots of good speakers sharing their own experiences and explaining good examples of best practice.

Peter Baber, Sheep Health and Welfare Group (SHAWG) Chairman and commercial sheep farmer, opened the conference



The ability of the scab mite to live off the sheep for 18 days means pens used to treat infected sheep remain potentially infectious for more than a fortnight.

with comments about the importance of the sheep industry coming together and interacting with the Government to try and reduce disease and increase sheep welfare, which would make sheep farming more productive and therefore more profitable. Excellent, I thought. More collaboration between the various bodies representing sheep farmers can only allow the industry to progress more quickly.

Collaboration was a topic I covered as a speaker on sheep scab, describing our approach at Alnorthumbria Veterinary Group to the parasite.

Sheep scab

I was preceded by some very good speakers, who looked at the science behind sheep scab. Professor Richard Wall from Bristol University told us about the very real difficulties in eradicating it nationally, as it requires close cooperation and collaboration of all sheep farmers. As this was not being led by the Government, he thought it likely we would just have to go on living with scab as an endemic disease, especially where there was common grazing. Unfortunately the scab mites will become resistant to the medicines we have available to kill them and it will be an ongoing cost to the sheep farming industry.

I am more optimistic that we can eradicate scab nationally, as we have products that work. All that is lacking is the will to use them in a coordinated fashion.

Dr Peter Bates, ex-chief parasitologist at AHVLA, reminded us that the biggest practical difficulty in managing scab is that



A debate on sheep scab at the SHAWG conference involved Joe Henry (far left), other experts and sheep farmers.

the mite can live for 18 days off the sheep. Most new infections come in on infected sheep that are not yet showing signs of itching, so risk factors are obviously bringing on sheep (either new or returning from grass parks), boundaries with sheep neighbours, and contractors such as shearers, scan men, hauliers etc. Assume brought-on sheep are infected and treat and isolate accordingly, remembering that the pens used to treat the new sheep will be infectious for 19 days. Feral sheep can be a source of infection and should be culled or treated.

Coordination

And then it was my turn – the graveyard slot of last speaker of the day! I explained that if sheep scab is suspected on one of our farms then we get a definitive laboratory diagnosis. Due to its infectious nature, scab cannot be tackled one farm at a time. It will need a coordinated effort by a group of neighbouring farmers, all at least one farm clear of any confirmed

and monitoring it, and the importance of quarantine procedures, medications and farm biosecurity (e.g. double fencing boundaries) to avoid bringing new diseases to your farm which could cost your business. Paul Roger, a Yorkshire vet, emphasised the importance of all this by explaining the science behind the procedures.

Quarantine

All the speakers demonstrated that every farm is different and individual businesses need to speak to their private vet to draw up a quarantine plan, for when new sheep are brought on especially.

During a debate on biosecurity and quarantine, the six-day standstill rule was brought up and the very real logistical



Good disinfection protocol.

problems that complying with this brings, leading to circumventing the rule being widespread. A better rule of isolation facilities on each farm and correct reporting of movements would prove to be more workable and allow more accurate traceability in case of a disease outbreak, it was argued.

diagnosis, to eradicate it from the district.

A meeting is therefore arranged and consensus is reached as to when all the sheep are to be treated in a coordinated fashion. Guidance is given by ourselves as to type and timing of treatments. A chairman from the farmers is selected to follow up and make sure everyone does what was agreed.

It is imperative that every single scab mite is killed, so 100% full gathers are required. Weighing of sheep and a full dose from calibrated guns for every sheep, or following dip instructions exactly, is vital. If one sheep gets an injection into the wool by mistake the whole treatment will fail and time and money is wasted.

If this is not done scab merely circulates from farm to farm and becomes endemic, with farmers having to treat two or three times a year independently, with the cost of medicine and time. Worryingly this will select for resistance in the scab mites. By using our coordinated approach instead, we have cleaned scab out from different practice areas.

Enforcement

A discussion about sheep scab, chaired by Chris Lloyd of Eblex, revealed large regional variations in current enforcement by trading standards when scab was present. This must be sorted out as a priority.

What amazed me was the fact that the vast majority of sheep farmers present at the conference had not seen scab in their flocks in the last few years. I feel this is a real opportunity if the sheep industry wants to eradicate scab.

The conference was an exciting place to be and it felt as if industry direction could be influenced here. Overall I found it a very informative and would recommend it to anyone connected to the sheep industry.

Find papers from the Sheep Health and Welfare Conference at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/SHAWG. The event is organised biennially. Also see page 42 for SCOPS information on sheep scab control.

Est. 1854
Osmonds
Animal Nutritionists & Veterinary Suppliers

Putting a *spring* in their steps for over 30 years



Osmonds Lamb Colostrum Supplement

was the very first colostrum supplement to be sold in the UK. Over 30 years later we continue to produce the highest quality Colostrum Supplement so your lambs get the very best start in life.

Quality ✓ Reliability ✓ Mixability ✓

Visit www.osmonds.co.uk or call 01048 668 100