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VET FUTURES

Safeguarding the role of the vet in sheep farming

Continuing Veterinary Record's series of articles discussing the state of different sectors of the veterinary profession, Fiona Lovatt reviews the role of vets in sheep farming in the UK, arguing that they need to deliver high-quality, cost-effective advice to secure their position in the industry.

BRITAIN has by far the largest national flock of sheep in Europe, producing over a third of the European total of sheep meat (Eurostat 2014). Worldwide, there are over one billion sheep, although, even on this scale, the UK is in the top 10 for the magnitude of its sheep population, albeit with a considerably smaller flock than the leaders China, Australia and India (FAO 2011). On a global scale, small ruminants are of vital importance due to their cheap maintenance and provision of meat, milk and fibre, factors that ensure their position at the forefront of the increasing livestock production required to feed the growing world population. As sheep are able to use marginal land that could not otherwise be used, sheep farming in Britain is an integral part of our farming landscape, particularly in the uplands, but also with significantly sized lowland operations.

Industry profile

Although the value of the UK sheep industry is usually about a fifth of the size of the combined beef and dairy industries, there are over 15 million breeding ewes in the UK compared to just 3.5 million breeding cows (Defra and others 2012) (Fig 1). As custodians of animal welfare, veterinarians cannot simply consider the monetary value of animals and, arguably, every sheep has as much right to 'a life worth living' as every cow (FAWC 2009). Sheep have a particularly high profile in the eyes of the British public, due to their large numbers and almost year-round visibility in rural areas. Hence, the resulting correspondence with parliamentary representatives ensures that sheep welfare remains on the political agenda.

Fiona Lovatt, BVSc, PhD, DSHP, DipECSRHM, MRCVS
Flock Health, Balmer House, Eggleston, County Durham
DL12 0AN
e-mail: fiona@flockhealth.co.uk

Dr Lovatt is also at University of Nottingham, Sutton Bonington, Loughborough LE12 5RD

Surveillance spending in the UK is heavily focused on cattle, primarily due to bovine TB, with only 2 per cent spent on small ruminants (Drewe and others 2014) (Fig 1). When surveillance spend was compared by livestock units, sheep and goats were the least funded animals at £0.39 per 12.5 animals compared to £0.79 per 3.3 pigs and £2.07 per 588 chickens (Drewe and others 2014). Perhaps there should be more concern about this gap in surveillance, particularly considering the outdoor nature of sheep farming and the potential wind- or midge-borne spread of certain exotic diseases.

The economic value of the UK sheep industry is broadly comparable to that of the pork industry (Defra and others 2012) (Fig 1), but the two sectors differ considerably in structure, size of units and their use of veterinary services. In contrast to the small number of specialist pig or poultry veterinarians, the sheep industry is still firmly – although, as discussed below, not always comfortably – placed within the hands of the general farm veterinary practitioner.

The most recent survey of the veterinary profession that documented the time spent in practice with different species indicated that the proportion of veterinary time spent working with sheep, dairy and beef cattle more or less mirrored their relative value of production (RCVS 2014) (Fig 1). However, in a more detailed analysis of one first-opinion farm-only practice in south-west England, sheep holdings made up 23 per cent of the 1329 holdings visited in 2013 and had the highest proportion of out-of-hours visits, but contributed only 5 per cent to practice turnover (Reader 2014). Such figures reflect how the sheep sector is not currently a high priority for practitioners, even those in farm-only practices. However, they also demonstrate the magnitude of the potential opportunity, in terms of the currently underdeveloped market for sheep veterinary services.

Farm health planning

Official figures suggest that 50 per cent of sheep farmers implement a farm health plan in consultation with vets (Defra 2013), although personal communication with



Marginal land supports hill ewes at the top of the UK's stratified sheep industry

Lamb joints on sale at Smithfield market. Britain leads Europe in the quantity of lamb meat produced



members of the Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS) suggests wide regional variation.

Average figures are considerably below 50 per cent, but the range is from just 1 per cent to over 90 per cent of clients. In a telephone survey of 2500 farmers, 56 per cent of sheep farmers reported using a written health plan, but, of these, only 28 per cent were reported as having been written with veterinary assistance (ADAS 2007). In the same study, only 22 per cent of sheep farmers reported year-round routine contact with their veterinary surgeon, while 68 per cent reported emergency contact only (ADAS 2007). Personal observation suggests that successful flock health planning is continually active and evolving and has nothing to do with a tick-box document produced only to fulfil farm assurance requirements.

Sheep farmers commonly compare the value of an individual sheep with the costs of veterinary services and state that economics are a major barrier to using a veterinarian more regularly for advice (Kaler and Green 2013). This is compounded by the simplistic view taken by certain industry advisers that the cost of production might be reduced by lowering the headline 'vet and med' cost in the farm accounts, with little regard to potentially reduced performance and increased mortality, replacement rate, days to finish, feed and labour costs. Of course, the advice of a valued sheep veterinarian will always consider the balance between the economics of each of these factors, the health status of the flock and the marketplace for the finished lamb or breeding stock. Additionally, few sheep farmers (7 to 14 per cent) calculate their farm profitability or know their costs of production (ADAS 2007, Kaler and Green 2013), and in one study it was found that all the participating focus farms could justify veterinary consultancy costs based on cost-benefit

calculations for specific disease targets (ADAS 2008).

It is often suggested that the farm veterinary practitioner is identified as 'a farmer's most trusted adviser' (Green 2012), and this may be the case in the dairy industry where veterinarians are regularly on farm for routine fertility visits. Unfortunately, in the sheep sector, the veterinarian's lack of expertise of sheep farming was one reason given by farmers for not using them proactively (Kaler and Green 2013). Sheep farmers have complained of poor advice from veterinarians who are primarily focused on dairy cattle (Hubbard 2013) and, in general, the business focus of the service provided by veterinarians has not been compared favourably to that of providers of other farm services (Lowe 2009).

Barriers to the vet/farmer working relationship

It has been suggested that the limiting factor in the demand for preventative services from veterinary practices may be competition from outside the profession (Henry and McElwee 2014) and, indeed, it can seem that there is no limit to the number of salesmen who will trek up farm drives to give advice alongside the sale of unnecessary and expensive supplements. Many sheep farmers consider that they themselves are the 'best' people to understand the management of their sheep flocks and, with access to many sources of information often available free of charge, they do not necessarily consider the veterinarian as an independent source of advice (Kaler and Green 2013).

The National Farmers' Union considered that the main barrier to farmers making greater use of veterinary services was the perception by farmers that veterinary input was not strategically targeted towards solving business problems, reducing costs and boosting profitability and, consequently, farmers see the veterinarian as a cost, not a benefit (Lowe 2009). There are many examples of the divergence in views between sheep farmers and veterinarians (Kaler and Green 2013, Stubbings 2014, Bellet and others 2015), and clearly the resolution of these misunderstandings is essential to the building of successful flock health planning relationships. It has been suggested that greater success might be achieved by the veterinarian who focuses first on outcomes, for example, lamb growth rates and sales patterns, rather than the problems, such as anthelmintic resistance (Stubbings 2014).

At worse, there is the danger of a 'downward spiral' in which sheep farmers

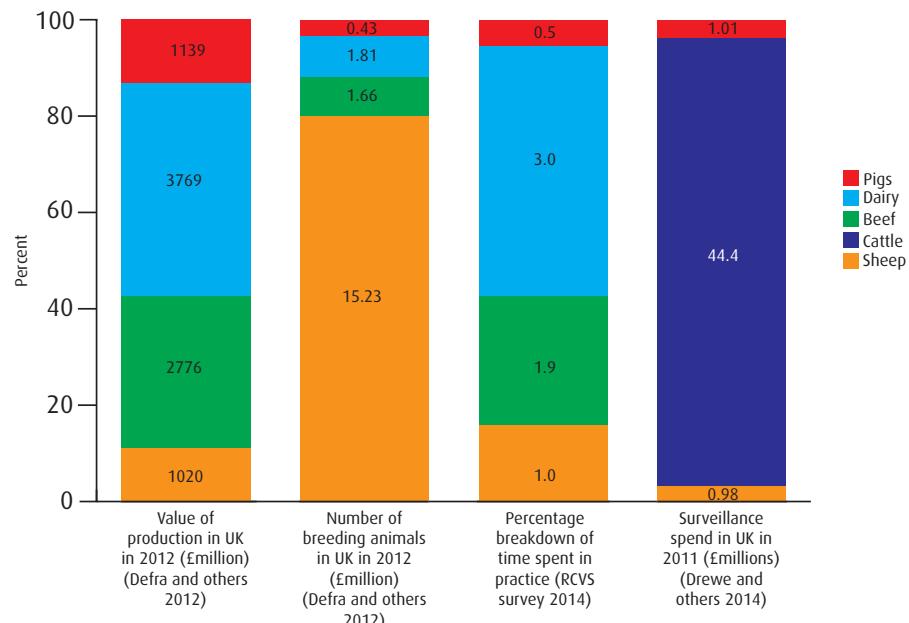


FIG 1: Comparison of the value of production, veterinarian time and surveillance spend in the UK for pigs, cattle and sheep

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perceive veterinarians to be expensive and neither sufficiently interested nor expert enough to contribute to the success of their enterprise (Kaler and Green 2013). Recent research suggests that many veterinarians do not have much contact with their sheep farmer clients, as they do not believe themselves to be sufficiently knowledgeable or expert enough to be proactive and they do not believe that farmers will pay for their services (Bellet and others 2015).

Looking to the future

So, how might this situation be improved? Despite the negatives, there are successful models of sheep veterinary practice that are both appreciated by sheep farmer clients and profitable to the practice. There are a number of enthusiastic, committed and knowledgeable sheep veterinarians who actively contribute to the successful series of regional practitioner-focused 'Talking Sheep' meetings, attend SVS biannual conferences, or participate in events arranged through the SVS working in collaboration with the British Cattle Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Association. Such collaboration aims to provide relevant resources to support all sheep veterinarians via a new web-based platform (www.sheepvet.net), due to be launched later this summer.

Some sheep farmers do see the benefit of regular veterinary involvement, suggesting that proactive veterinarians might work with groups of smaller flocks to reduce the cost per ewe (Kaler and Green 2013). With this in mind, a couple of practices in England have begun to pilot a scheme where a dozen sheep farmer participants



Traditionally, emergencies during lambing have been the predominant reason for veterinarians to have contact on sheep farms

pay a monthly subscription to partake in an active veterinary-facilitated discussion group that focuses on flock health planning. Early results suggest financial viability for the practice and positive feedback from the farmer participants (Lovatt, personal observation).

What is more, there is a real will among industry leaders to encourage the active involvement of sheep veterinarians on sheep farms. Following the National Sheep Association (NSA) proposal for an Animal Health Scheme financed with a

proportion of the Pillar 2 CAP budget (NSA 2012), current proposals for the next round of the Rural Development Programme funding hinge on the control of endemic disease which, if funded, will lead to more veterinarian involvement on sheep farms (NSA 2014, NSA and NFU 2014).

Call to act

It was suggested in the Lowe Report that 'the marginalisation of farm animal veterinary medicine is potentially to the detriment of the veterinary profession, the farming and food sectors and the public interest in the health and welfare of food animals. It can be countered and reversed if those involved act resolutely and in accord' (Lowe 2009).

Evidence suggests that cattle veterinarians have acted resolutely (Statham and Green 2015); however, compelling evidence indicates a need for urgent action to counter the marginalisation of sheep veterinary medicine. The challenge for all UK sheep veterinarians is to maximise their 'motivation, capability and opportunity' (Bellet and others 2015) so as to place themselves firmly in the position of delivering the high-quality and cost-effective advice that is required on sheep farms.

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Veterinarians are encouraged to engage sheep farmers with an initial focus on outcomes rather than problems

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Fiona Lovatt

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