

STAMPING OUT LAMENESS

Sheep lameness is a significant problem in Scottish flocks and can affect lamb production, growth rates and – ultimately – profitability. However, having a lameness strategy in your flock health plan can help keep lameness at bay.



Farmers like Steven Knox from North Balloch, Alyth, pictured here with vet Ian Gill, know the importance of including a lameness strategy in their flock health plans.

QMS has produced a free guide on the diagnosis and treatment of lameness in sheep to help farmers identify the risks and prevent problems, as well as giving guidelines on treating existing problems.

Vet Ian Gill from Thrums Veterinary Practice in Kirriemuir has first-hand experience of farms with lameness issues and has been instrumental in helping to reduce problems by supplying medication, providing advice on good practice and promoting lameness strategies in flock health plans. Ian, a past president of the Sheep Veterinary Society, holds a certificate in sheep health and production and is a Moredun regional advisor.

“Nationally the most worrying cause of lameness is Contagious Ovine Digital

Dermatitis, also known as CODD, but in our area foot rot, scald and shelly hoof are the main problems,” he said.

Farmers with flock health plans who are in regular contact with their vets are more likely to prevent lameness problems. CODD is often brought onto farms from bought-in sheep; Ian’s advice is to check where sheep are coming from and, if possible, avoid buying from places with a known problem. Acknowledging this is easier said than done, he advised that all bought-in sheep should be quarantined for at least four weeks and foot bathed twice before being turned out with others. He also said that, ideally, the quarantine fields should be those targeted for ploughing and reseeded.

He explained: “CODD is a very contagious condition which can be brought onto upland farms when hogs have been away-wintered on dairy grass where cows have suffered from digital dermatitis. Farmers should ask about this when they are negotiating winter grazing lets.” Another source of foot rot or CODD is bought-in tups, and infection can quickly spread when they are turned out with ewes.

The Thrums practice has almost 100 sheep farmer clients, of which seven have had their whole flocks injected with antibiotic to control foot rot or CODD. Ian injected one flock in 2012 with antibiotic to combat CODD at a cost of approximately £2.50 per head; however, the farmer believes the move was worth it due to the improved welfare, the extra production he achieved and the reduced labour costs. Lameness problems had led to veterinary treatment costs of £1.40 per head in 2011, £3.04 in 2012, reducing to £0.21 in 2013 and £0.50 in 2014 after flock treatment.

Strict quarantine and/or (in the case of foot rot) vaccination has avoided having to repeat flock treatments in the other six flocks.

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Ian said: “We found that, on average, lame ewes were a condition score less and were more likely to be barren. We believe that if there is 10% lameness due to CODD in a flock then injections are worthwhile. Over 2% lameness requires some treatment, but it can often be controlled by changes in husbandry, use of a footbath or, in the case of foot rot, vaccination.”

The shelly hoof problem often found in hill ewes can be hereditary, according to Ian, and care should be taken not to retain ewe lambs from female lines prone to it. It may also be down to a nutritional problem, and if it is proving a significant issue then it may be worthwhile testing for trace element deficiency.

Foot rot is probably the most recognisable of sheep lameness problems, and it is now

believed that scald is an early stage of foot rot. The advice now is not to routinely trim and, in fact, the old treatment method of trimming, purple spray and turning back into field will only cause the condition to spread. According to Ian and the information from the QMS leaflet, sheep with foot rot should be isolated and treated with antibiotic sprays and if necessary, injections. If trimming is necessary then shears should be disinfected after each foot and sheep pens also swept and disinfected to avoid further contamination.

Ian said: “My advice would be not to pare feet routinely, even if they are a bit overgrown. Leaving them untrimmed does not usually do any harm and if they can be turned out onto a bit of rough ground or hill, the natural wear usually solves the problem.”

Wet or poached ground, particularly around feeding stations, leads to a higher incidence of foot rot and Ian said that wherever possible feeders should be situated on hard standing or spread some builders’ lime around the base of feeders and keep feet as dry as possible.

One of the best times to check for lameness is at scanning and Ian said that, in his experience, it is often the lame ewes which are barren or carrying singles. If they are to be housed for lambing then he said it was best to try to keep lame ones separate and treat. He also advised putting lime under the straw.

Other good times to check over the flock and carry out treatments are at weaning and pre tupping, when there are fewest feet on the ground, with only the ewes and tups to check. A period of dry weather at this time can help kill the bacteria. He said, “The bacteria that causes foot rot will not survive in the soil for more than 10 days, so whenever sheep are being moved to clean grazing, it is worth walking them through a foot bath.”



Ian said that one of the problems with lameness is that, unless the farm has a health plan where annual discussions with a vet highlight problems, few farmers ask a vet’s advice regarding lameness. Correct diagnosis is important, as the many products available from agricultural stores are not always the most appropriate for certain conditions.

He said: “Now that the recommended treatment for many of the lameness problems is antibiotics, as highlighted in the QMS leaflet, hopefully more farmers will consult their vet and get to the root of the problem.”+

The QMS booklet lists and describes the most common causes of lameness in sheep and how to recognise them. It offers practical advice on both prevention and treatment, and on general foot care, and is available from the QMS website www.qmscotland.co.uk. If you would like to receive a free hard copy in the post, please phone QMS on **0131 472 4040**.

