Tackling lameness on farm - how to judge appropriate use of antibiotics

By Philippa Page and Fiona Lovatt, Flock Health Ltd

Lameness is still one of the most common issues facing sheep farmers, and an area of great frustration to those who appreciate its significant costs to flock performance but have so far failed to tackle it effectively.

How often have we heard comments such as ‘my antibiotics are not working’, ‘isn’t there anything stronger?’, ‘I’ve tried everything but nothing seems to work’ and ‘there’ll always be lame sheep’. There are a number of reasons why these comments are all too common.

Following much research into sheep lameness, we know correct diagnosis is key. Engaging with your vet and developing a farm-specific lameness control plan will include establishing the correct diagnosis and developing an effective control plan.

Every actual case of lameness has significant costs for the individual in terms of pain, stress and loss of performance, and costs for the flock as the disease spreads and further cases develop. This means a major key to success is to prevent new cases occurring, and careful implementation of the five-point plan has been proven to work on many farms.

Prompt treatment

One of the points of the five-point plan is the prompt treatment of clinical cases with an injectable antibiotic. Of course, it is absolutely right to carefully consider every treatment with an antibiotic and to only use when necessary. However, it is also very important to consider that many cases of lameness results from the pain of a bacterial infection of the foot and the only appropriate treatment is the prompt injection of an effective antibiotic. It is essential that every injection is appropriately administered.

It is totally appropriate to treat affected sheep with the correct antibiotic at the correct dose, following the correct diagnosis. It is not appropriate to ‘blanket treat’ whole flocks with antibiotics. However, in cases of high levels of footrot or contagious ovine digital dermatitis (CODD), it is appropriate to separate out all sheep with lesions into a ‘crock flock’ and to treat every one of these sheep at the same time. The five-point plan should be used with the sound remainder of the flock, with no lame previously-lame sheep mixed in until completely problem-free.

Scald in lambs

Topical spray antibiotics are appropriate to treat lambs with scald lesions and to use in addition to injectable antibiotics for adult sheep to reduce the spread of surface bacteria. Disinfectant footbaths are useful for the treatment of scald in lambs and to help avoid the spread of disease, but they are not effective to treat clinical footrot or CODD. Antibiotic footbaths are not licensed for sheep but your vets may recommend their use specifically to control the spread of CODD in the face of an outbreak.

The use of antibiotics in the treatment of lame sheep is important to effectively heal infected lesions, but they have no long lasting preventative action so they must be used as part of a combined lameness control plan. By working closely with a good vet on a lameness reduction plan, farmers can both dramatically reduce levels of lameness as well as the quantity of antibiotics required for its treatment.

Turn over for more information on footbathing, plus identifying the difference between footrot and CODD.
Treating clinically affected sheep

- **Use the correct product for the diagnosis.** In adult sheep, scald is usually a case of early footrot and should be treated as such. The majority of simple antibiotics work very effectively for both, by acting from within, so improvement is often noted following just one injection. CODD often requires a prolonged antibiotic course and there are farms where the simpler antibiotics no longer work and it is essential your vet is actively involved.
- **Dose correctly.** Each product has a different concentration (so 5ml for one is not 5ml for another) and the average ewe bodyweight varies from 50kg to 90kg. Under-dosing is worse than just an ineffective treatment as it increases the chance that bacteria will develop resistance to that product. Carefully read the instructions or discuss with your vet each time.
- **Treat promptly.** Antibiotics will work most effectively if given as soon as possible after lameness is first noticed and before extensive damage to the horn and deeper tissues has occurred.
- **Store appropriately.** Do not keep product that is out of date or that has been contaminated by a needle that has been in a sheep. Only ever use a sterile needle to penetrate the bottle.
- **Consider your actions.** Research demonstrates trimming lame sheep can delay healing and that infection can be transferred on the foot trimmers themselves. Where possible, avoid trimming.

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