

Hello and welcome to the February newsletter. I'm always glad when January is over with – it always seems such a long and dark month, whereas February really marks the beginning of Spring.

I have been battling with the Practice Health and Safety Policy over the last few months – a long and tedious but very necessary process. We have taken advice on the Policy, and one of the pieces of advice involves people handling bulls. The bottom line is that we will need to do a risk assessment (written) when the farmer in charge of handling a bull that we are examining or TB testing, is 65 years old or older. Several of my colleagues are concerned this may cause offence. Being only 10 years away myself, I think most of you will be able to laugh it off – you have to have a sense of humour when you get described as 'senior', get sent adverts about funeral plans, stair lifts etc etc. Please be assured that any questions are part of a necessary process.

Last month, Germany reported Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in a herd of water buffalo. The UK has implemented a ban on the import of live sheep, pigs and cattle and restrictions on the import of products of animal origin from Germany. We have been warning about Bluetongue Virus (BTV) over the last few months. The clinical signs of both these diseases are quite similar – increasing the importance of staying vigilant and reporting anything suspicious.

Fingers crossed for Spring like weather! Lovely to see little lambs bouncing around outside.

Mary

### Vet-Assisted Calvings and Lambings

It's a busy time of year on-call for us farm vets! Just like you, we love a successful outcome from a calving or a lambing call-out. It's a team effort between us to get live offspring and healthy mums, so here are a few things that you can do to maximise the chances of success all round if you need the help of a vet this birthing season:

- Call early – don't exhaust the cow/ewe (or yourself!) – the vet may take some time to get to you
- Clean hands (preferably gloved), animals and environment all reduce the chances of infection, don't skimp on bedding
- Lights are very helpful
- A table keeps kit cleaner
- Have some fresh, mains water in a clean bucket handy
- Protection from the weather; rain falling into surgical wounds and wind blowing dust around increase the chances of infections
- Proper restraint (especially for cattle)
  - Safe in standing and lying down positions
  - No chance of cows swinging round
  - Plenty of space to the rear, in case a calving jack is needed
  - Plenty of access to the left side of the animal's belly, in case a Caesarean is needed
  - No other animals in the area to interfere!

Cont P.T.O.

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- Extra pairs of hands for restraining the animal, helping the vet lift and pull, and reviving lambs/calves
- Somewhere quiet to keep the cow/ewe afterwards, so they can be monitored and nursed individually as needed

## The Drive to Survive: Avoiding Early Lamb Losses

You've no doubt put a lot of work into getting ewes in lamb, looking after their pregnancies and doing your best to prepare for all eventualities that lambing time can throw at you. So once lambs start hitting the ground, you want to make all that work worthwhile by keeping them all going! Aside from the obvious welfare benefits of avoiding lamb deaths, this is a critical area to focus on if you're wanting to improve your margins, overall annual production figures and sustainability. There are many influencing factors to consider, and of course these will vary on your system, but here's a quick starter for ten.

The most common causes of lamb losses in the first week of life are: watery mouth (*E. coli* infection), septicaemia, starvation (after hypothermia or mismothering), injury, predation or birth defects. The odds of many of these are much higher after a difficult lambing. What can be done to stack the odds of their favour instead?

**Ewe nutrition** – ewes that are short of energy in late pregnancy are statistically more likely to have difficult lambings and lose lambs. The ideal way to control this is by scanning for lamb numbers and precisely preparing diets, based on forage analysis and metabolic blood tests. For the ewes to see the benefit, ensure feed is fresh, consistent and that you're providing enough feed space. There are a couple of studies that show feeding forage more than once a day reduces lamb mortality, presumably thanks to increased intakes and frequency of ewes feeding.

**Colostrum** – everyone knows the value to lambs of this 'liquid gold'; but do you know what sort of quality colostrum your ewes are producing? This is closely connected to ewe condition and nutrition in the critical last few weeks of pregnancy and can be easily measured on your farm using a Brix refractometer (aim for more than 26.5%). Once you're sure of the high quality, aim to feed 20% of the lambs' birthweight within 24 hours (with half of this fed before the lamb is 6 hours old). For the average 4kg lamb, that would be 400ml by 6 hours old, up to 800ml by 24 hours old.

**Environment** – indoor lambers have this easier; but those outdoors will have to tackle predation and exposure risks. Both are pretty difficult to control without buildings, unfortunately! Effective field shelter, natural or man-made, can still reduce lamb losses by 50% in bad weather. Remember to get the ewes used to it well in advance; surprising them might lead to abandoned lambs.

**Infection control** – together with good colostrum management, hygiene is very important for reducing losses to infectious diseases e.g. watery mouth, mastitis. That includes pens, equipment and the people involved. Bedding up daily, wearing gloves, disinfecting stomach tubes in between uses and avoid climbing in and out of mothering pens too regularly can all help.

**Staffing** – an AHDB study suggests that rather than the ratio of ewes to people working, it is the training and experience of those responsible for ewe and lamb care that improves statistics of lamb survival. If you are stretched thin with labour for the labour ward (pardon the pun); prioritise your time to the highest risk groups i.e. ewes lambing for the first time, or carrying multiples. Make these groups the most convenient and accessible of all your sheep, perhaps even install CCTV. For the outdoor lambers lacking in night vision, you'll need to rely more heavily on breeding for maternal ability, plus sire and ewe conformation.

**Breeding decisions** – timing your lambing period to best suit your farm location, facilities and availability of staff is a key factor in ensuring lamb survival success. As you might expect, lamb mortality rates are highest in early lambing flocks (worst in December in a recent Irish study). Interestingly, a recent research study has found that there wasn't a correlation between lambing period length and lamb survival rates; so flex this to your logistical needs and try to avoid overwhelming your staff! The other important aspect is of course ewe and ram choices – selecting for easier lambing means lambs born will be stronger and more likely to live.

Whilst this isn't an exhaustive list, hopefully it highlights a few of the big-impact areas when it comes to lamb survival. Of course it's always nice to quantify the effect of any changes you make – keeping a few records of simple lamb numbers at birth, marking or turnout, weaning and sales is interesting to compare different management changes year on year. It will also give you something good to discuss with the vet next time you're in conversation! Wishing you best of luck for a successful lambing season, remember we're always on the end of the phone if you need us.

This month's author was Sarah Woollatt.



### Office opening hours

Monday – Friday (Except Bank Holidays)

8.30am - 5.30pm

### Emergency out of hours service

Weeknights 5.30pm - 8.30am

Saturday & Sunday all day