

Questions and answers

Published 9th July 2001

The disease has returned to a local area previously thought to have been controlled. Many farms were culled out in the general area from nearly four months ago but a new case is extremely worrying.

This is in the public domain with pictures and interviews in the local press. What is not publicly debated is how effective can vets be in checking stock before movement licences are issued? Individual farmers are expressing concern however and a constructive discussion between a knowledgeable vet and an involved farmer, not a client, shows up some of the issues.

The farmer is questioning the effectiveness of checking sheep. What is the correct way to do this? How accurate is a veterinary examination and how sure is the vet of his detection of a negative? Does the simple fact that the vet has never seen a case of FMD limit his ability to detect lesions?

In some practices there has been a split role between the large animal vets who stayed to service their clients and those who went off temporarily to do battle with the virus. The 'client' vets have worked hard not to become implicated in FMD because this would restrict their ability to attend to the day to day needs of the practice. It is the temps that have seen the disease and on their return their knowledge is being shared with colleagues. So, how confident can the farmer be that an examination by his usual vet means no FMD?

When push comes to shove it was commented that the most significant aspect for the ability of a veterinary surgeon to detect FMD in sheep is the on farm facilities for animal inspection. Where have we heard that before? Just about every disease condition of sheep has been blighted by a delayed diagnosis due to poor handling facilities. The location of the flock is therefore a major issue. It is likely that the sheep cannot be moved to where the handling facilities are best without a licence and so licences are having to be issued in the absence of good handling facilities.

Another point in the discussion concerned the risks associated with the movement of sheep that may be carrying the subclinical virus. Assuming the sheep are taken directly to slaughter, are farms that are passed en-route at risk or is it contamination of other animals at the abattoir that is an issue, or both?

If farmers are unclear about the way the virus can present a risk it is difficult to apply good biosecurity. Many people in the countryside are pleased to see the lifting of restrictions on access but concerned that the disease is lurking undetected. The accuracy and application of blood testing surveillance is extremely important. So far the local infected area boundaries have not had to be extended, having shrunk, but the recent case may delay the opening up of a greater area of Dartmoor.

Looking back at local incidences the farmer and vet considered the contiguous cull practicalities. It was of interest to learn that contiguous has been a part of the TB language for some time. The strict application of a common boundary clearly is insufficient in practice and does not necessarily provide a virus firebreak around an infected farm. The geography of the immediate area and the location of stock is of more importance than any consideration of being contiguous. Whereas, in the initial rush of culling a general rule was applied, if the virus is returning, a more specific assessment with consideration of local conditions is the way forward. Land ownership is so variegated today that the notion of blocks of self contained land has to be dismissed. If movement of stock between blocks of land is going to require licensing for a long time then maybe some readjustment by farmers of stocked land will take place.

It is now possible to collect the full set of red or green sheep shearers and sheep dippers. Will these licences become collectors pieces in years to come? By definition many of the red dippers and shearers within the infected area will have lost customers but as green dippers cannot enter their patch they may pick up extra flocks.

There is a figure that is circulating about a national loss of animal health sales to FMD of fifteen percent. Undoubtedly this will have a range for particular businesses and sales through veterinary practices will be very variable. It has come home to many managers that when you depend on the vet to apply product this is curtailed when access to clients is restricted. A simple point but marketing managers will be considering the impact and looking at ways and means of future damage limitation.

The local vicar has had to obtain a mobile phone that searches for a signal from the various providers. Reception is so patchy locally that he is concerned when people in distress cannot reach him. The duration of this outbreak is taking a toll on family relationships.

Richard can be contacted on 01363 866353 or E-mail: rga@agmed.freeserve.co.uk

Richard Gard

21st June 2001