Look out for virulent footrot in your flock

By Dr Ian Lugton, District Vet

Although uncommon in NSW, virulent footrot has undergone a resurgence in recent years because of the wetter seasons that have prevailed across the state. Restockers in southern parts of NSW have also been introducing infection through careless introductions from Victoria, where the disease is still prevalent.

Early signs of virulent footrot

Early cases of virulent footrot start with a dermatitis between the toes. This can affect sheep of any age and initially appears as an inflammatory response where the skin reddens, hair falls out and a yellow to grey smelly scum covers the skin. This early stage is indistinguishable from benign footrot, which is surprisingly common in the wetter areas of the South East LHPA. As the disease progresses the hard horn on the inside of the toes becomes underrun. This underrunning may extend across the sole and under the outside wall of the hoof in advanced cases. This often leads to a disintegration of the normal hoof structure and an infestation with maggots. Presence of liquid pus is not a feature of footrot.

What should I do if I suspect virulent footrot in my flock?

As virulent footrot is a notifiable disease, its suspected presence must be reported to a LHPA Ranger or District Vet for investigation. If you have foot issues with your sheep which you can’t attribute to heel or toe abscess, please contact us for investigation so we can rule out the presence of virulent footrot. This disease is a significant menace to the sheep industry of Australia and has severe animal welfare implications in badly affected mobs.
Australia is currently free of TSEs (Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies) such as Mad Cow and Scrapie and enjoys a ‘negligible risk’ status. However, to support trade and continued access to export markets, and to maintain this favourable status, a national surveillance system for TSEs is managed by Animal Health Australia. The program requires the collection and testing of several hundred sheep and cattle brains from sick animals annually. This program pays $50 per sheep brain and $300 per cattle brain to farmers who provide stock for autopsy, with a maximum of two brains for any disease incident. Suitable brains are those from sheep and cattle that are showing signs of a nervous system disorder; something that could be the result of disease in the brain or spinal cord. Sheep must be a minimum of 18 months old and cattle 30 months to nine years of age to qualify.

Animals for autopsy should be alive and could show the following range of signs:
- downers not responding to treatment (e.g., milk fever or pregnancy toxaemia)
- depression
- blindness
- head pressing
- staggering
- circling or knuckling when walking
- tremors
- paralysis
- stock that are simply just behaving strangely or crazily.

While conducting the autopsy, the vet involved will be able to provide useful information on visible conditions affecting the animal such as liver fluke, intestinal worms, cheesy gland, hydatids, pneumonia etc. They will also form an opinion as to the true cause of the nervous condition and submit a range of samples to exclude TSEs and allow a definitive diagnosis to be made.

The testing laboratory is under an obligation to establish a real diagnosis as well as to rule out TSEs. As such it will examine a range of samples submitted. Any lab testing that helps to arrive at the cause of the condition is done free of charge.

For further information please contact your LHPA District Vet at any of our local offices or your private vet to conduct an investigation.

South East welcomes new District Vet

The South East LHPA is pleased to welcome new District Vet, Dr Petrea Wait. Petrea commenced in early January and will be responsible for the Cooma and Bombala districts.

Petrea enrolled at Murdoch University as a mature aged student, initially gaining entry as a first year biology student. She was then able to achieve direct entry to second year veterinary science the following year. In 2003 she graduated with a Bachelor of Veterinary Science and a Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine and Surgery with First Class Merit Honours.

After graduation Petrea went into mixed practice in the Western Australian wheatbelt towns of Northam and York. After a busy and rewarding two years, she decided to move closer to home and took up a position at the Yass Veterinary Hospital.

During this time Petrea has administered to a varied clientele, ranging from large grazing properties, feed lots, hobby farms, stud horses, sheep, cattle, goats, alpacas, dogs and cats, as well as numerous companion animals and wild life.

In her spare time Petrea is a keen horsewoman, having competed successfully in a variety of horse events ranging from Dressage to Western Pleasure. She also breeds Thoroughbred horses and dreams of producing a Melbourne Cup or Cox Plate winner. Petrea will be joined in Cooma by her long time partner, John, her two dogs, three cats and numerous horses.

Dollars for Downers - how can you get involved?

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Bovine anaemia now a serious threat to cattle

By Dr Ian Lugton, District Vet

On the south coast there have been a number of significant outbreaks of Theileriosis, with costs to one affected dairy farmer estimated at $350,000. A seriously affected Milton beef herd also suffered many tens of thousands of dollars in losses. In a recent DPI survey of 64 properties across NSW who have experienced deaths from Theileriosis, it was estimated that the mortality rate in affected mobs was often around 10%, and that it cost producers on average of around $20,000 each or $78/per head. This is now a significant disease within NSW, and it has recently continued spreading across many parts of Victoria.

Bovine anaemia or benign Theileriosis, is a disease of cattle caused by Theileria orientalis, a vector-borne blood parasite. This disease is similar to the tick fevers of northern Australia, in that the blood’s red cells are destroyed and affected stock become anaemic and jaundiced. Although Theileria has been present in Australian coastal districts for many years, without causing significant illness, one pathogenic strain, the Ikeda variant, has entered Australia in recent years and can kill infected stock.

Once cattle are infected with Theileria organisms, they carry the infection for life and are capable of spreading the infection to other cattle through biting arthropod vectors. Bush ticks (Haemaphysalis longicornis) are believed to commonly transmit the infection, but biting insects such as sucking lice and March flies are also capable of spreading this disease. Ticks seem to have thrived the last year or two following good seasonal conditions. If you notice ticks or March flies on your property, your stock will be at high risk.

Cattle that have never been exposed to any Theileria strains previously may develop severe disease when exposed to the Ikeda strain. The typical scenario associated with an outbreak is when unexposed, susceptible, heavily-pregnant cattle are introduced to a coastal district from further inland. After a month or two the cows begin to abort late-term calves, or they may begin a lactation, only to develop a fever, severe anaemia and jaundice (yellows). Affected animals may appear lethargic, depressed, hollow and weak. Many will dry-off and some will die.

This last calving season has seen many calves becoming infected. Calves are often born without exposure to any strain of Theileria, and are therefore susceptible. Some will succumb to Ikeda between six to 16 weeks old. Calf deaths are now the most commonly encountered form of Theileriosis seen in coastal areas. If you notice hollow and lethargic calves that are white around the gums, eyes and vulva, they very likely have Theileriosis. These calves will usually have a fever, may froth a little around the mouth or show signs of respiratory distress and some may have snotty noses. They will not walk far before knocking up and having to sit down. Some appear to die suddenly without them being noticed as sick beforehand. On opening a fresh carcass, you will be struck by the pallor of the tissues and the watery nature of the blood.

Once Theileriosis has a grip on an animal, the drugs that are currently available for treatment have proven not to be particularly effective.

Successful control therefore relies upon prevention. If you are planning to introduce any stock, especially bulls, late pregnant heifers or cows from outside the immediate area and particularly from the tablelands or further away, you should consider tick and fly control for the first month or two, and keep an eye out for early signs of this disease. Attention to reducing stress, fluke and worm control, nutrition and trace element supplementation will also be important adjuncts to a preventative strategy.

Products such as the ‘mectin’ drenches, and Coopers Easy-Dose®, Bombard® and Arrest Easy-Dose® (pour-on insecticides/repellents) have been found effective in controlling ticks and flies for several weeks. These products can be employed to reduce the tick infestation potential with regular use.

DISCLAIMER: The discussion of an animal health product within this newsletter should not be taken as a specific endorsement for such a product. Mention of these products or their uses is for information purposes and to draw attention to their existence in the marketplace.
Composting dead stock

Composting dead animals as a disposal method has been gaining in popularity. It is simple and effective for disposing of dead stock – anything from poultry to cattle. The resulting compost can be applied to cultivated land, used as a top dressing for pastures or for improving shelter belts. This method of disposal is better than dumping carcasses in a gully, or worse still, in waterways. Such dumping of carcasses is a biosecurity and environmental hazard, and is illegal. Composting can also be used during fire danger periods, when burning carcasses would be hazardous.

The process is essentially an above-ground burial in a mound of sawdust, shavings, mulch or similar waste vegetable matter. This material acts as a carbon source for the compost. Sufficient vegetable material is required to absorb seeping fluids, to prevent the escape of odours and to stop access by scavengers. The first stage of composting generates temperatures over 55 degrees celsius. This heat kills most disease-causing organisms. During the second stage, the pile is turned and mixed, as the bodies are then well rotted, and the bones decomposing. The third stage is one of maturation and curing.

For the carcass of a cow, around 10m³ of vegetable matter is required. However, up to half of this can be recycled cured compost from earlier burials. Lay the beast on a 50cm bed of vegetable matter and then cover the carcass to a depth of around 60cm with the remainder of your carbon source. This material should be damp but not wet. Leave the pile for at least four months before turning. After the pile cools leave it another month before spreading. At this stage, large but clean and brittle bones may need to be removed or crushed. Several animals can be accommodated in the one pile so long as additional vegetable matter is used. For smaller animals the process is the same, but on a reduced scale.

For more information, Dr Lugton of the LHPA advises searching the web under ‘composting animal mortalities’ or similar.