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SUMMER 2016

# Livestock

## MATTERS

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### Sheep fertility

The benefits of using AI for the sheep flock

### BVD update

Sharing experiences to support BVD control on farm



Farm





ENGLAND



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## THE EDITOR

# Welcome to the 'Summer' issue of Livestock Matters

In this issue we turn our attention to getting ready for the sheep breeding season. We consider the use of AI in sheep and the opportunities it presents for sheep producers to improve their flock, without taking huge risks and our FarmSkills feature talks us through getting rams in tip top condition ready for mating.

We also explore how one farming family has embraced new ideas to get their dairy and beef enterprises fit for the future. Working with Jo Childs from Endell Veterinary Group they have tackled a number of issues and taken a more strategic approach to disease management.

Finally, we hear from Alex Cooper of Fenton Veterinary Practice on his return from Rwanda where he went to find out more about the Send-a-Cow project that XLVets practices raised money for last year. Send-a-Cow aims to help people long-term; it teaches

families who have very little, how to become self-sufficient and go on to earn a living from their surplus produce.

**We hope you enjoy this issue of Livestock Matters.**



**Joanne Sharpe**  
Editor



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# Beef Expo 2016



Visitors to the XLVets stand got the opportunity to discuss biosecurity and the safe use of veterinary medicines.

The National Beef Association's 2016 Beef Expo was held at The Agricultural Business centre at Bakewell Mart, on Friday 20th May 2016. The stand was manned by XLVet members from across the country alongside the XLVets team members.

This year, XLVets took part in the Future Beef Farmer Challenge which was run in association with AHDB Beef and Lamb, Carrs Billington and Derbyshire Federation of Young Farmers Clubs. Entrants were able to take part either as a team (up to four members) or as an individual. The challenge consisted of four parts;

Part one was run by Derbyshire Federation of Young Farmers Clubs; entrants had to correctly classify four finished cattle using the EUROP grid, points were awarded for identifying the correct conformation and fat class.

Part two was run by AHDB, looking at breeding and genetics, the competitors were asked a series of questions comparing the EBVs of bulls and selecting the most appropriate choice in different scenarios.

Part three was run by XLVets; we had a multiple choice livestock health questionnaire produced by Kat Lumb from Bishopton Veterinary Group, including biosecurity measures from our 'make your farm your

fortress' initiative against viruses and disease, as well as questions regarding the safe use of veterinary medicines.

Finally, part four was run by Carrs Billington; they tested entrants on their nutrition knowledge, identifying seven straight feeds, deciding whether each is primarily a source of fibre, energy or protein and then four beef diets and their most appropriate use.

The winning team was awarded the NBA's Duke of Northumberland Trophy.

Thank you to everybody who helped man the XLVets stand on the day.



Entrants waiting for the final result of the NBA's Duke of Northumberland Trophy





# BVDFree England - national BVD eradication scheme launches

## Why do we need to eradicate BVD from England?

As we are aware, Bovine Viral Diarrhoea or BVD is a highly contagious viral disease of cattle, and one of the biggest disease issues facing the UK cattle industry. BVD has been estimated to cost between £13 and £301 per affected cow and it is believed the national cost could be as high as £61 million per year.

## What is BVDFree?

BVDFree is a national industry-led scheme that launches on 1st July 2016 in England. Over 70 industry companies and organisations have pledged their support for the scheme, which includes industry bodies, pharmaceutical suppliers, laboratories, tag manufacturers, supermarkets and vets, among others.

The BVDFree scheme is based on achieving the elimination of the disease through identification and removal of animals persistently infected (PI) with BVD. A national database will support this by storing individual and herd test results for scheme members.

The BVDFree Scheme will be run on a voluntary basis until the majority of the cattle industry is covered by the scheme, when it is hoped collaboration with the Government will lead to the introduction of compulsory measures. The ultimate aim for the scheme is to achieve the eradication of Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD) virus from all cattle herds in the country by 2022.



## Why do we need BVDFree England?

By taking a coordinated approach across the cattle industry, this scheme will make BVD elimination possible. BVDFree England will

work in co-operation with the cattle industries in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Northern Ireland to eradicate BVD from the islands of Great Britain and Ireland.

Other countries have already taken action to eradicate BVD because they recognise that BVD is one of the biggest disease issues for the cattle industry. The Scandinavian countries Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark have already eradicated BVD from their national herds – so it can be done.



## It's time to take action:

- Ireland, Scotland and Northern Ireland are already taking action to eradicate BVD virus from their cattle herds through national schemes.
- BVDFree England will be the first national scheme in England.
- BVDFree will run a national database, that will store individual and herd test results for those that have joined the scheme.
- BVDFree England will work in cooperation with the cattle industries in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Northern Ireland to eradicate BVD from the islands of Great Britain and Ireland.

## What do I need to do to join BVDFree?

By joining the scheme, you agree to:

- ✓ Actively engage in BVD control in order to eradicate BVD from your herd.
- ✓ Report all BVD testing results from your herd to the BVDFree database.
- ✓ Allow herd status/individual animal status to be openly accessible through the BVDFree database.

- ✓ Not move persistently infected (PI) animals, other than directly to slaughter (or through a dedicated red meat slaughter market).

## How does this scheme differ from XLVets BVD CHECK TAG?

The XLVets BVD CHECK TAG scheme aims to help farmers identify animals that have had a BVD tissue sample test (TST) performed.

The BVD CHECK website provides a searchable database of all negative test results for the scheme, for any tests that have been completed.

The BVD CHECK TAG scheme will continue to operate, and in the short-term the database will still run to ensure any outstanding submissions can be uploaded, however farmers will be encouraged to join the national BVDFree programme going forward and display test results via this route.

The good news is that all existing BVD CHECK TAG results will be imported to the BVDFree database, unless a farmer requests otherwise.



## So what happens next?

XLVets has pledged to support the BVDFree scheme and your practice will be able to discuss with you how you can get involved. Over the coming months, our BVD CHECK TAG submission forms will migrate to offer you the option to have results displayed on the BVDFree database. In the meantime, if you need any further information then either contact your XLVets practice or visit the BVDFree website [www.bvdfree.org.uk](http://www.bvdfree.org.uk).



Veterinary surgeons **Mike Glover and Liz Nabb**

XLVets practice **Torch Farm and Equine**



# The benefits that AI can bring to sheep flocks

MIKE GLOVER AND LIZ NABB, TORCH FARM AND EQUINE

The use of artificial insemination in sheep flocks has several benefits: it allows semen from rams of high genetic potential to be used without commitment to the purchase of a ram; it allows one ram to be shared by smaller flock owners; and it can be used as a management tool, to concentrate the lambing period.



Mike Glover and Liz Nabb with Matt Geen

South West Sheep Breeding Services provides AI and embryo transfer for sheep farmers, and is part of XLVets Torch Farm and Equine. Last season, over 1,000 laparoscopic inseminations were carried out. Here, vets Mike Glover and Liz Nabb outline the potential for farmers.

## Breeding services

SW SBS was set up in 1990 by Mike and embryologist Ronnie Lock, and is now led by Liz with support from Mike and Ronnie, and technicians Jemma Morris and Kate South.

Liz explains 'The service provides an opportunity for small flocks to use frozen semen from a good ram. This helps them avoid inbreeding, and rams can also be shared between flock owners without the risk of spreading disease.'

'For larger flocks, using AI can enable one ram to cover a large flock in a short time, and keep lambing periods concentrated.'

'Fortunately different breeds want to lamb down at different times, so we get a spread

of work! The main breeding season is July to September, plus Dorset sheep flocks will be inseminated in April.

'We can hold up to 20 ewes here at our South Molton practice, but travel out to flocks for larger numbers.'

Frozen semen is used in around two-thirds of cases, with the remainder using fresh.

In a survey carried out by SW SBS on the lambing rates (% of ewes AI'd that lambed), 77% of 4,100 ewes lambed following insemination with fresh semen, and frozen semen gave a 68% lambing rate (from 7,544 ewes).

Mike adds: 'Breed and timing in the season also affect the results. We see slightly better results in Charollais and Suffolk ewes, whereas February-lambing Texels can have poorer lambing rates.'

## Flock improvement

Sheep farmer Matt Geen has been using AI for the past two years to introduce new genetics into his 400-ewe pedigree Lleyn flock.



He farms in partnership with his father Bill, at Coombeshead Farm near South Molton in Devon. The farm is 900ft above sea level, and very exposed.

The Geens run three different flocks, on two systems. A pedigree Lleyn flock and a flock of Lleyn crosses are lambed indoors from the beginning of March. A third flock, of a new breed, the Exlana, is lambed outdoors (see panel).

Matt fully utilises the benefits of EID to improve the performance of his flocks. Lambs are weighed at birth, at 8 weeks and then every 4 weeks. Both the Lleyn and Exlana flocks are Signet-recorded providing

### A breed for extensive systems

Matt is one of the original farmers who pioneered the development of the Exlana, a breed designed for extensive systems; prolific ewes with high mothering instincts capable of lambing unaided outdoors. It is a wool-shedding sheep which develops a rough winter coat making it suitable for harsh climates.



This year 650 ewes lambed down outside from 10th April with just Matt to look after them. The lambing percentage was 170%.



Matt fully utilises the benefits of EID to improve the performance of his Lleyn and Exlana flocks

Matt with Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) and breeding indexes.

Matt is keen to improve his Lleyn flock, but wants to use proven rams. He's been adopting the use of AI on his very best ewes.

He explains: 'The traits that make up the terminal sire EBVs – such as muscle depth and fat depth – are very heritable and relatively quick to assess. However, with the Lleys, it's mothering ability, that is important. But this is not very heritable and takes much longer to be evident. So the accuracy of this EBV is less reliable to start with.'

'I didn't want the gamble of buying an expensive ram, only for its EBV to fall. So this year I've used frozen semen from two rams – born in 2009 and 2011. They have already sired plenty of offspring which have gone on to lamb, making the EBV more reliable.'

Last autumn Matt selected out his best 100 ewes based on their EBVs – those with good scores for characteristics such as maternal ability, muscling, and worm resistance. Then from these he chose the best 50 for AI, based on their 'good structure' – teeth, feet, and teat placements. These traits are not included in the EBV figure.

### Success factors

Management factors on-farm play a critical role in assuring good conception rates.

Matt's ewes to be AI'd are run as a separate flock. In September they are flushed to promote egg development, with the aim of getting them 'fit not fat'. After ovulation is synchronised using intra-vaginal sponges, insemination takes place on 1st October so that lambs are born in the last week of February, ahead of the rest of the flock.

Mike will visit the farm to AI the sheep according to the treatment programme, supported by a technician. Matt starts to feed his ewes 7-10 days before they are to be AI'd. This helps them get used to being handled. He explains: 'They will come to me, and do not need rounding up. So it's nice and quiet. No stress! They are used to seeing humans and coming into the pens to get the feed.'

After being AI'd, ewes are returned to the pen for hay and water, and go back to the field once the effects of the anaesthetic have worn off. 'Then we leave them to settle down and only view them from afar,' says Matt. A sweeper ram is introduced ten days later, and ewes are scanned before Christmas.

The AI has been very successful. This year, of the 50 ewes inseminated the lambing rate was 86%. And of those that held, the lambing percentage was 210%.

Mike says: 'I'm sure Matt's above average results are in large part due to his attention to detail and excellent short and long term pre and post-AI management of the flock, plus the provision of good on-farm facilities for the AI day itself. He is also breeding at a time of year when the fertility of the Lleyn ewes is likely to be at its peak.'

Matt says: 'The lambs from the AI are already standing out in the flock – they are structurally good, and liveweight figures are also good so far.'

'AI is a lot less risk than buying a ram – I can be sure I haven't wasted money, nor a year of time.'

The impact of using AI on the best ewes has been clear; the flock's maternal index average was increasing by 5 units per year from 2008-2014. However, after using the frozen semen from the high EBV rams, the average index jumped up 26 units in one year.

### AI – evaluating the option

Lambing rate is influenced by a number of factors including type of semen used – whether fresh or frozen, the breed, the year, plus a host of farm factors. So Mike and Liz advise that farmers interested in using laparoscopic AI to improve flock genetics, or as a management aid, should talk to their vet. Also, if possible, they should go and see the technique being used to appreciate the factors that can influence its success.



Mike Glover carrying out laparoscopic AI



Veterinary surgeon **Alastair Hayton**

XLVets practice **Synergy Farm Health**



ALASTAIR HAYTON, SYNERGY FARM HEALTH

## Award win for vet with a holistic approach to herd health

Last autumn, vet Alastair Hayton from Synergy Farm Health became the 2015 winner of the Farmers Weekly Award for Farm Adviser of the Year.

In addition to his work as a farm vet, Alastair is involved in the development of a new TB test, and also consults with commercial companies and industry bodies.

At the Synergy practice, Alastair works with 13 dairy clients, providing veterinary advice and support across all aspects of dairy cow health including nutrition and youngstock rearing. Four of his clients are organic producers, and amongst them is Roger Barrington who farms with his wife Helen at Staggs Farm, near Taunton.

### Herd plans

Like several of Alastair's clients, Roger has to live with a 10% chance of summer flooding, and the limitations this puts on grassland and herd management. Despite these challenges, Roger has expanded his herd over the past three years, from an original 80 milking cows, to the current 145.

As the majority of his leys are permanent pasture, Roger believes the farmland is not good enough to support a high yielding Holstein herd. Hence he has opted for an organic system with Friesian cows. Over the past two years, he has been introducing some Montbeliarde genetics into the herd, with the aim of increasing the size of cow.



Roger has recently started introducing some Montbeliarde genetics into the Friesian herd

Roger explains: 'My larger cows are Alfed with Friesian semen, but the smaller ones and the first lactation cows are put to a Montbeliarde. It's still early days, but the Montbeliarde cross heifers seem to be better milkers.'

The current herd yield averages 6,500 litres/cow with a butterfat of 4.1% and protein 3.4%.

### Benefits of vet support

Five years ago, Roger began working more closely with Alastair and taking a proactive approach to herd health. This has included having fortnightly fertility visits. It resulted in the calving index falling from 460 days to 380, in just 18 months.

Roger says: 'You don't realise how important these visits are until you see the knock-on effect. This is a key change which has pushed us forward – now I'm getting more milk and more heifers coming through too.'

These regular visits provide the opportunity for all kinds of herd matters to be discussed. Roger has also found his vet useful in helping him source a 'new' second-hand parlour and mixer wagon, and some organic fodder beet!



Now that Alastair is more involved on the farm, all kinds of herd matters are discussed between them

### Time savers

Time is a huge limiting factor for Roger, however a number of time-saving changes have been made, and more are planned.

Alastair has helped Roger and Helen to adopt the use of computer records rather than relying on paper. 'It's much easier to regiment and put systems in place now,' says Alastair.



The routine fertility checks have improved in-calf rate, but a lack of time meant Roger was missing more heats than desirable. So 18 months ago, the herd was set up with heat detection collars.

Alastair comments: 'Heat detection collars are a tool to improve fertility, but they are not the total solution. It is still important that Roger looks for heats himself.'

The 'new' second-hand 12/24 swingover parlour has also freed up time for Roger. He explains: 'Milking in the 8-abreast parlour was taking a total of 9 hours a day, but now it's down to 5 hours. I've kept some of the old parlour to serve as an AI pen. And before next winter, I'm planning to have built a slurry lagoon which will save me another 80 minutes a day as I won't have to go spreading every day.'



The 'new' second-hand parlour has freed up time for Roger

## Comfortable cubicles

To hold the growing herd, Roger has modernised and extended the old cattle shed, giving the new part a high roof and improved ventilation and installing new mats throughout the shed.



The cattle shed has been extended, with an increased roof height for better ventilation

Alastair says: 'We needed to improve cow comfort and lying times in the cubicles. Given the need for organic compost at Staggs Farm, straw was the only realistic bedding material, but it was not sufficient alone to provide the level of cow comfort we wanted, and was very expensive to use. The legs of the cubicles meant Roger couldn't retrofit mattresses and so mats have been installed instead, and straw is then added on top.'

## Disease prevention

The herd at Staggs Farm is vaccinated and monitored for both BVD and leptospirosis using a bulk tank test every 6 months and blood sampling youngstock at 10 months of age before they are vaccinated. A Blackleg vaccine is also given.

'We've carried out a 30 cow screen for John's disease but not found any evidence of its presence, and there is no clinical history of cases either,' explains Alastair. 'We know we need to test further by looking at the whole herd, but as we are clear on the screen and we are not seeing clinical cases, it's been decided that it is not a priority right now, in terms of capital outlay.'

'With IBR, the bulk tank test showed evidence of exposure, but the herd has shown no clinical signs. There's been no milk drop or respiratory disease in the adult herd attributable to IBR for many years. Hence, rightly or wrongly, we have opted not to vaccinate.'

Mineral nutrition has also been a focus. Alastair explains: 'The soils in this area are recognised as being copper deficient, and organic farms are recognised as being higher risk for mineral deficiencies due to the high levels of home-grown forage that is fed. So we've taken liver samples from cull cows and blood-tested heifers, and Roger now feeds a customised organic mineral supplement to compensate for the lack of copper and other important micro-nutrients in the forage.'

## Next focus: Lameness

'With fertility improvements made, and ongoing, the next target is to reduce lameness,' says Alastair. 'But again, the practical reality is that Roger's time is limited.'

'Roger has already installed a footbath but the first step will be to draw up protocols for foot health, and address the risk factors.'

Roger adds: 'The new milking parlour and faster throughput should help, as cows won't be standing around for so long. And I realise I need to do further work to level out the exit from the parlour so cows don't have to walk on a slope.'

Alastair adds: 'Mobility scoring will need to be done monthly, and Roger needs a more regimented trimming protocol.'

'The culling rate has been low at Staggs Farm, because expansion has been the main aim. But now, with more heifers coming through, some cows can be culled without detriment to economics.'

## A terrible nag?

Roger says: 'Alastair cares about what he does and is adamant about getting the best for his clients, although sometimes I think to myself, have I really got to do that? But, annoyingly, he's nearly always right!'

'I am a terrible nag!' confesses Alastair. But if this is true, then it is much appreciated by Roger.

'I used to have vets come onto the farm, do the job, and leave,' says Roger. 'But now Alastair is more involved, and we can make decisions together.'

Roger's aim has been to milk 145 cows 'really well'. Thanks to Alastair's veterinary input and advice, improvements in fertility have been achieved and Roger is also benefiting from better yields per cow and more milk per year.



Turnout at Staggs Farm



JO CHILD, ENDELL VETERINARY GROUP

## New ideas and forward-thinking gear up farming business for the future

Farmer Ewart Grant and his family have developed a strategy to withstand their constant TB restrictions and have adopted several new farming practices as they gear up their business for the future. Along the way, they receive advice and support from vet Jo Child of Endell Veterinary Group.

Based near Salisbury, the farming partnership consists of Ewart Grant and his sons James and Thomas, and his brother John, and his two sons Andrew and David.

Ewart explains: 'All our sons wanted to come back to the farm and help us take the business forward, even though some had been working in other industries. They have brought new ideas and fresh drive.

more than a 6-month clear period,' explains Ewart. TB tests have to be carried out every two months.

So the Grants have adopted the strategy of farming as if the farms are going to be permanently locked down. 'We no longer aspire to sell store cattle,' says Ewart. 'Every animal is now finished on the farm.'

The decision was made to enter the bull beef market, and a contract was secured. Ewart adds: 'Bulls are fed barley grain and a 34% mineralised protein concentrate. By 12-15 months of age, we are expecting Friesian bulls to reach 300kg liveweight, and the beef crosses, 370kg.'

A new cattle shed with handling facilities was required, and was completed in January this year. Ewart explains: 'My son James was the main driver for the new buildings, and my nephew Andrew has been very involved with its design.



Ewart Grant



Friesian bulls

Ease of feeding and operator safety have been paramount in the new development.



Outdoor handling facilities

'The livestock side of the business includes a suckler herd and two British Friesian dairy herds, one at Shrewton Farm and one at Rookery Farm, totalling 480 milking cows. The dairy herds calve all year round and are grazed from the end of February to end of October. Milk yields average 6,500 litres/cow with a butterfat of 4.1% and protein 3.25%.

Jo makes fortnightly fertility visits to both farms and PDs cows when they are 34 to 49 days in-calf. These visits also provide the opportunity to discuss other herd health matters.

### Strategy for TB

Both farms have been shut down with TB for most of the past 14 years. 'We've not had

Veterinary surgeon Jo Child

XLVets practice Endell Veterinary Group





The water troughs and feeders are outside of the pens and accessible for cleaning. Inside the bays, there is hard standing in front of the feed barrier, and a straw-bedded area at the rear into which cattle can be shut. The handling system is designed to enable bulls to be run from their pens into the crush and/or lorry and always be on the inside of the barriers whilst people stay on the outside.



Inside handling facilities

Ewart adds: 'With this system we can pick out a single animal if needed. We also always insist that there are at least two people around when anyone goes into one of the pens.'



Dairy handling facilities

A small suckler herd has been expanded by James Grant and now numbers 80 Angus x Friesian cows. Ewart explains: 'The herd makes use of some of the smaller grazing areas on the ranges. Cows are calved down in spring, but the pasture is too poor for overwintering a growing calf. So they are weaned in early October and will now be brought into the new shed and finished the same as the dairy calves.'

Ewart adds: 'TB isn't going to go away for the foreseeable future. The new buildings have been carefully thought out and they have

helped make the business stable for the future in what is an unstable climate.'

## Being selective with dry cow therapy

The policy of taking a selective approach to the use of dry cow antibiotics may be new to some dairy farms but it was adopted at Rookery Farm and Shrewton Farm over 18 months ago. Jo explains: 'Back then there had been a lot of talk about this. Both herds had low bulk tank cell counts, and we wanted to stay ahead of the game. So we introduced the practice, before it became mandatory.'

The criteria for only administering a teat sealant to a cow at drying off are: 1) no mastitis in the lactation; 2) a cell count of less than 200,000 cells/ml; 3) and milk passing the California Milk Test.

This approach meant 40% of cows received only a teat sealant, and in the first 12 months, the dry cow tube bill was cut by one third.

Jo adds: 'Last summer there were a small number of clinical cases of mastitis spread by flies. So this year, all cows will be given a dry cow antibiotic over this period. It's still being selective, and still being responsible in the use of antibiotics.'

## New calf rearing practices

Another new idea brought onto the farm has been a change in the calf rearing protocol. Calves are fed on their dam's milk for the first four days, and then reared outside in electric-fenced areas of paddock. Milk replacer is brought to them there.



Outdoor calf rearing

## Red water fever

Cattle that are turned out onto the ranges, are at risk of the tick-borne disease Babesia (red water fever). Clinical signs include bright red urine (hence the name), lethargy and jaundice. Blood samples can appear watery, and the culprit parasite can be seen under the microscope.

Jo explains: 'As a practice, we see a lot of ticks and Babesia cases. Hence we keep a blood transfusion kit ready for emergency situations.'

'This year we have seen cases as early as February. Animals born into a population where

## Disease issues

Jo explains: 'Our practice is currently offering some free testing services to assess the BVD and IBR status of herds.'

'The Grants' dairy herds are vaccinated against BVD, and a bulk tank test has shown there is no disease circulating in the herd. Youngstock were having annual blood tests to check for PI animals but this has now been superseded by Tag and Test ear tags.'



Tag and Test ear tags are used to check for BVD PI animals

The herd is also vaccinated for IBR and leptospirosis, and youngstock are vaccinated against the clostridial disease Blackleg.

However, the TB situation has been hampering plans to eradicate Johnes' disease from the herds. A control plan is in place; quarterly milk testing is used to identify Johnes' positive animals, which are then added to a cull list.

Ewart explains: 'In addition to voluntary culling, we lose a lot of cows through the TB tests. We can't really afford to lose any more animals from the herd.'

Jo adds: 'The Johnes'-positive cows will eventually be culled out for other reasons. Meantime they are identified with a red ear tag and managed differently; they will be bred only to beef bulls and calves will be snatched at birth and fed milk from other dams.'

## Next focus

With disease control strategies in place, Jo is now helping the Grants to tighten the calving interval by treating empty cows sooner. Due to the poor grazing, heifers have been calving down at three years of age, so another aim is to reduce the age at first calving.

ticks exist will become immune to it. However, rather unusually, there have been three clinical cases at Shrewton Farm recently.

'There is just one medicine which can be used to both prevent and treat the disease. When used preventatively at the lower dose, cover only lasts a short while. As it has a long withdrawal period, it's important to be correct in the diagnosis! We tend to recommend it only for treating known clinical cases, and as an adjunct to blood transfusions.'



Veterinary surgeon **Alex Cooper**

XLVets practice **Fenton Veterinary Practice**



ALEX COOPER, FENTON VETERINARY PRACTICE

## A farming charity in Rwanda does more than just send cows

Last year, to celebrate XLVets' 10 year anniversary, XLVets staff and 53 member practices embarked on various challenges to raise money for charity. They sought sponsorship to travel 'around the world' and variously walked, ran, cycled, kayaked and swam a total of 34,727 miles.

The money raised went to local charities selected by the practices, and also to an international farming charity – Send a Cow – which supports Rwandan families. Alex Cooper from XLVets' Fenton Veterinary Practice in Pembrokeshire raised the most money individually in the challenge – nearly £2,000 – and was invited by the charity to visit some of the projects being run.

### A better life

Despite its name, the charity does a lot more than just give cows (or goats, rabbits and bees) to farmers.

Alex explains: 'Send a Cow helps very poor families – some of whom have an income of less than 1US\$/day – to become self-sufficient in food for themselves, and to gain the confidence to be able to manage their lives and the livestock.

'The underlying aim is to teach families to firstly become self-sufficient, and then to be able to sell any surplus food so they can have an income to improve their homes, educate their children, and, in some areas, connect to the mains water supply. Some farmers have gone on to form co-operatives to sell their produce, and are employing other people in the community.

Environmental management and sustainability are key features of the Send a Cow projects; families are helped to build rainwater collecting tanks to conserve water. They also work with other charities to provide solar lamps which saves the expense of buying kerosene for gas lamps.

### Keyhole garden

Many families that Alex visited had created a keyhole garden in their front yard in which to grow vegetables – peppers, celery, squash, cabbages and some local varieties.

'Every available space and old container had been used,' explains Alex. 'The keyhole technique helps to improve the soil through composting and also aids moisture retention. The sloping sides increase the available area for growing crops.

'Less than a year into the project the family were now self-sufficient in vegetables and were selling any surplus. Before the project, they would have just kept the area swept.

'Giving people the skills to work and cultivate land that they already have access to is a cornerstone of the project.'



A keyhole garden



## About cows



A man caring for his cow

'Rwandans love cows,' says Alex. 'They are a symbol of wealth. They provide milk, and of equal importance, fertiliser. This enables the soil to be improved so that more crops can be grown, even through the dry season. The dung is even used to produce biogas for cooking.'

To receive a cow, families must be able to demonstrate that they are producing vegetables to feed themselves and have cultivated at least half a hectare of land for



Cow shed with veg garden in front

fodder crops to feed a cow.

The charity will then teach families, usually meeting up in groups of 30-40, to build a shelter for the cow; they are also taught animal husbandry skills.



Jean-Claude and Josephine had received a cow last December and she had calved. The cow produced 200 litres of milk in the first month and a surplus of 60 litres was sold. This generated enough money to buy one year of health insurance for the family

## Zero grazing systems

All of the Send-a-Cow projects operate on a zero grazing system. In Rwanda, this is the most welfare-friendly option for the following reasons:

- 1. Disease** – Tick borne diseases are common in Rwanda, as is Brucellosis (Undulant Fever in people). Reducing exposure to ticks reduces the chance of disease in people and animals.
- 2. Heat stress** – It's hot in Rwanda and black cows and sunshine do not mix well! Providing shade in an airy shed is a far more comfortable environment to be in. There is a small outside area should the cow wish to go out (they rarely do).
- 3. Free access to feed and water** – The alternative to being housed is being tethered or being shepherded, because fences do not exist. In which case, access to water may be restricted and feed may not always be abundant. The farmers with Send-a-Cow are trained to provide plenty of forage (including conserved forages in the dry season) and to provide plenty of water, essential for milk production.
- 4. Companionship** – Being a herd animal, the cows would probably prefer to be in a group but until resources allow, this is not possible. However, these cows are not alone, their owners dote on them! They are brushed, scratched and interacted with frequently.

## Mini biogas plants

'With cows being housed, then all their manure and urine can be collected,' explains Alex. 'These make ideal fuel for a biogas plant. They are mixed together, with some water, in a concrete masher. This drains into a large plastic or concrete silo. The mixture is fermented to produce biogas which rises to the top of the tank where a small pipe plugs directly into a gas burner. There is enough gas generated to cook all day, every day. So there's no need to send the children out to get firewood, they can go to school instead!'

'The manure is pushed out of a pipe at the other end of the tank by the pressure of the



The mixer used to add dung to the fermentation bag

gas. This is collected into a slurry pit and from here it can be mixed with compost and used as a fertiliser for the garden. It was very, very impressive!'



This is the fermentation bag, the pipe takes the biogas produced to the cooker; below, cooking on gas instead of fire



## Why it works

'In the past, the soil was hard and infertile, there was malnutrition and no future for these farming families. The Send-a-Cow charity has shown them how to use the resources they already had, and taught them new skills.'

'There is no doubt in my mind that the Send-a-Cow formula works,' says Alex. 'Motivation and education are the keys to success, and these have to be sustained. It appears that the Send-a-Cow team are very good at doing this and the support from other villagers enrolled on the programme means that there are always mentors to support those that are struggling.'

'Before my visit I had equated 'charity' with helping people survive and to just get by. But this project empowers people and enables them to have plans for the future. Plans that are not too dissimilar from our own, albeit on a slightly different scale.'

Through their fundraising activities, XLVet practices raised over £35,000 to support both charities local to them and Send-a-Cow. Following this amazing achievement several XLVets members have been working with Send-a-Cow to consider how they can further support the fantastic work that the project undertakes.

The XLVets FarmSkills training has been identified as a valuable tool that could help improve animal husbandry and livestock health for all the African countries the project supports. The aim over the next three years will be for XLVets practices to raise funds to enable four XLVets vets to deliver specific training to improve skills and knowledge of project co-ordinators and farmers.

Keep an eye out for an update on how the project progresses and how the training is being used by Send-a-Cow farmers in upcoming issues of Livestock Matters.

# Eradicating BVD from your herd: strategies and tools

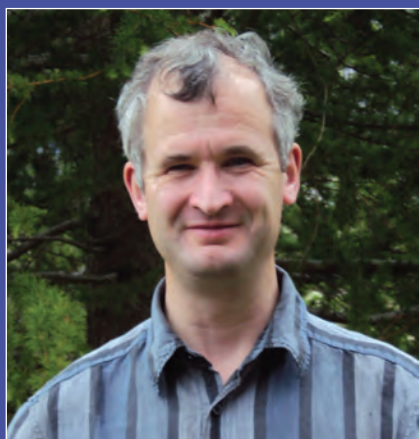
BVD has been recognised as one of the biggest disease issues affecting the UK national herd. Over the past few years, a number of voluntary and compulsory schemes have been put in place in different regions, as part of co-ordinated industry and government efforts to eradicate the disease. Most recently, BVDFree England was launched (see News section).

Here, three XLVets vets outline some of the strategies and tools available for farmers to initiate their own BVD eradication programme for their herd.

## Routes to eradication

Eradication requires the removal of all PI animals.

Andrew Millar of Ardene House Vet Practice, Aberdeen explains: 'Vaccinating a herd against BVD will limit the performance-depressing effects of the virus that is shed by PI animals, but it will not eradicate the disease.'



Andrew Millar, Ardene Veterinary Practice

'The main aim of vaccination of the breeding cattle is to reduce the risk of more PI animals being created when a foetus becomes infected in the early stages of gestation.'

'There are various routes to establishing if a herd contains any PI animals. The first is to go on a PI hunt: test all calves which are born for BVD virus, and any cows or heifers which have not yet produced a calf for testing. All breeding bulls used on the farm also require a BVD virus test.'

'A PI heifer or cow will always produce a BVD PI calf. And it can be assumed that the dams of any calf born which tests BVD virus negative, are not PI.'

'This is a quick route to BVD eradication but

the upfront cost can be a deterrent to some farmers.'

'In Scotland, prior to the Scottish Government's BVD eradication scheme, some herds only tested their bulls and any heifers prior to them joining the breeding herd. This ensured no PIs were added to the herd, so eventually any PI cows would be removed from the breeding herd when culled for other reasons. These herds usually used BVD vaccination as an additional biosecurity measure. This alternative method had a lower annual cost, but is a slower method for BVD eradication.'

'Once a herd has removed all BVD PIs then it's important that some method of monitoring is instigated, to make sure the herd remains BVD virus free. This can be done at a reasonable cost by using a check test on animals aged between 9 and 18 months of age. Five animals from each management group should be tested for BVD antibody and this will show if they have met any animals shedding BVD virus. It is best to wait until animals are over 9 months old so that any maternal-derived antibody will have disappeared. Care must also be taken if vaccines for BVD are used prior to the BVD check test.'

'Once a farm has become BVD-free, then with good biosecurity, the actual cost of annual testing to monitor the herd status, is minimal.'

In Scotland a national eradication programme was begun by the Scottish Government (SG) in 2010. It includes the annual testing of herds for BVD, and then classifying them as 'negative' for BVD, or 'not negative'. Stage four of the plan came into force in June 2015, and it is now illegal to knowingly sell or move BVD-infected animals.

## Testing calves

The advent of Tag and Test ear tags has enabled the early detection of any PI animals born on the farm.

This tool plays a key role in Northern Ireland's eradication programme: it is now compulsory for all calves born to be tested for BVD. Test results are uploaded onto an online database and no animal can be sold without proof that it is BVD-free.



Treenie Bowser, Parklands Veterinary Group

Treenie Bowser from Parklands Veterinary Group explains: 'This new regulation came into force in March this year. It came after a three-year voluntary scheme in which farmers were encouraged to adopt this early start approach.'

'Although there's no rule to cull animals identified as being PI, why would anyone





want to keep them? They may appear perfectly healthy but their presence has a knock-on detrimental effect on the rest of the herd or group. For instance, where there is a PI animal in a batch of calves, it is likely to increase the incidence of scours and pneumonia.

'One PI animal can wreck the whole herd.'

She advises: "With eradication the end goal, it's important that all dead calves are also tested. If the calf is a PI, then their dam could be one too. If she's not tested and is a PI, then she will not only be shedding the virus and affecting her herdmates, but she will go on to produce more PI calves in the following years. So farmers need to either test the dead calf, or test its dam. And if a calf does test

positive, then test its dam too."

### Biosecurity

BVD is highly contagious. It can be spread by nose to nose contact. So biosecurity is especially important where fields border those containing cattle of unknown BVD status.

For farms in areas of high livestock density, or where biosecurity measures are expensive or difficult to install, then ongoing vaccination may be recommended by the farm vet, despite a herd being BVD free.

The buying-in of animals presents another risk of the virus entering the herd.



Keith Cutler, Endell Veterinary Group

Keith Cutler from Endell Veterinary Group explains: 'Ideally, a policy of only buying in animals from herds accredited BVD-free by a CHCS registered cattle health scheme should be adopted.

'And regardless, all newly purchased animals should be quarantined and tested on arrival at the farm.

'There are now a number of online databases which allow the BVD status of a herd or individual animal to be checked out prior to purchase. This not only avoids the expense



of buying in a PI animal, but it also averts the risk of other quarantined cattle being exposed to the virus.'

The BVD CheckTag online database, set up by XLVets in 2014, has the ear tag numbers of over 77,000 BVD-free animals. These results are being migrated into the new national BVD-Free England database.

### Your herd and BVD

BVD has already been eradicated from Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. Other countries are in various stages of instigating disease eradication plans.

But eradicating a disease from a country takes time. The new BVD-free England initiative has a goal of achieving eradication by 2022. To achieve this will require engagement from all English cattle farmers.

Keith adds: 'Given sufficient engagement, it is likely that voluntary schemes may be made compulsory in time.

'However, regardless of voluntary schemes or compulsory regulations, there are financial and herd health benefits in having a BVD-free herd.

'Every farmer has access to the tools and



strategies to start their own BVD eradication plan. By enlisting the help of their vet, a programme can be devised which best suits the farm and herd situation.'

### The PI animal

Eradicating BVD requires the removal of all Persistently Infected (PI) animals. These animals will ultimately die prematurely from the disease, however, meantime they will shed the BVD virus and affect the health of their herdmates. In-calf cows and heifers exposed to the BVD virus may suffer abortions or give birth to a PI calf. The BVD virus is also detrimental to an animal's immune defence system, so animals exposed to the virus have an increased susceptibility to other infections, e.g. mastitis, pneumonia.



ENGLAND





# Practical Guide

Welcome to our series of FarmSkills practical guides that aim to provide you with top tips and best practice advice for a range of on-farm animal health tasks.

## On-farm ram preparation

**NICK PILE**  
**CLIFFE VETERINARY GROUP**

When preparing for your next crop of lambs, it is all too easy to neglect the rams. Much focus is put on ensuring that the ewes are in correct body condition, that they are supplemented with the correct vitamins and minerals and that they are flushed prior to breeding. However this is only half the story. If the rams are not fit to do the job, then that will negatively affect your scanning percentage.

Fit, fertile rams are essential to achieve a high scanning percentage, and a tight lambing pattern. As a result, it simplifies pre lambing ewe nutrition and lamb management. Ewes and their lambs will be at the same stage of the production cycle. A fertile ram should get 85%

of 60 ewes in lamb within the first 17-day cycle. This means that there will be less than 2% barren after 6 weeks. There are very few completely sterile rams, however up to 30% of rams may be subfertile, meaning they get fewer ewes in lamb and take longer to do so. If the infertile rams happen to be the more dominant individuals then this can lead to even more significant losses.

### Planning in advance

Many farms are running as few as 30 ewes to each ram. Fully fit and fertile rams should be able to mate twice this number, and some rams, depending on breed, age, topography and stocking densities will serve up to 100 ewes. Ask yourself the question how many rams do I need? Keeping fewer rams, but ensuring those you do keep are highly fertile, will save you money.

If your rams are fit, fertile and have been bred for longevity it will make a huge difference to the cost of tupping. Ensuring they have the correct conformation will go a long way towards minimising the risk of a ram breaking down, or developing arthritis early. Make sure their toes point straight forward, their back legs are not too straight (when viewed from the side), and that their pasterns are not

dropped. **Table 1** demonstrates how the cost of mating per ewe changes depending on longevity and ram power.

If you need to increase your ram power, plan ahead. Try not to buy a ram from a sale one week before he needs to work. He will need at least three weeks to adjust to a new ration. Rams are often overfed running up to sales, and if put out to work without concentrate, with no transition they will melt away before your eyes. Always ask for an honest description of the pre-sale ration. In addition any incoming stock should be quarantined for four weeks. Source rams on the farm of origin wherever possible, and look to source MV (Maedi Visna) accredited, CIA (Caseous Lymphadenitis) monitored stock.



**Table 1: Cost of mating per ewe**

Number of mating seasons	40 ewes per ram	40 ewes per ram	40 ewes per ram	40 ewes per ram
1	£9.17	£6.11	£4.58	£3.67
2	£4.58	£3.06	£2.29	£1.83
3	£3.06	£2.04	£1.58	£1.22
4	£2.29	£1.53	£1.15	£0.92

*Ram cost per ewe mated, assuming lambing percentage of 150% and a £550 ram.  
(Source: AHDB Beef and Lamb)*



# The ram MOT - Tone, Toes, Treat, Teeth, Testicles

If you are expecting your rams to serve 60-100 ewes you need to ensure they are fully fertile. This starts with feed planning 2-3 months before tupping.

## Tone

You are aiming to have your rams in body condition score 3.5-4.0, i.e. fit not fat. (Loin muscles should feel full and rounded and horizontal processes of spine should not be detected). Over fat rams are often lazy and have a poor libido. The scrotum will also be surrounded in fat, which raises the temperature of the testicles and causes poor quality sperm.



Tone

## Toes

Every ram should have all four feet inspected. Any lameness problems should be sorted out well in advance. Look for signs of stiffness or arthritis. Any pain will affect the ram's willingness to work and affect the scanning percentage and the number of barren ewes.

## Treat

Ensure that clostridial and other farm specific vaccinations (bluetongue, louping ill etc.) are up to date well in advance of the breeding season.

## Teeth

Check your rams' mouths to ensure they have good enough teeth to fuel them for the season ahead. The teeth should be complete with good occlusion of the teeth to the dental

pad. The jaw should not have any heat or swelling. Look out for dropping of food or drooling – these may be subtle signs of disease.

## Testicles

Ensure rams are shorn early. Overheating will mean rams will lie down for longer, squashing their scrotums and their testicles will overheat, resulting in poor quality semen. The testes themselves should be shorn to ensure adequate heat loss. Careful palpation of the testicles is essential. The testes should be freely moveable within the scrotal sac. Feel for any heat or swelling, any asymmetry, or hard and soft areas, and check for scrotal mange. The testicles should have the consistency of a flexed biceps muscle, and feel the same all over. The circumference of the scrotum at its widest point will vary a bit between breeds, but it is generally accepted that a ram lamb should measure approximately 32cm, a shearing 34cm and a mature ram 36cm.



Testicles

Check the ram's penis for signs of abnormal discharge or injury and ensure that it protrudes freely from the prepuce. The vermiform appendage (wormlike projection on the end of the penis) must be free of adhesions. There should be no brisket sores which may affect the ability of the ram to mount.

## Veterinary pre-breeding examination and semen evaluation

For those farmers wishing to drive down ram costs, and maximise their ram to ewe ratios, fertility testing of rams is essential. The insurance against poor productivity that fertility testing provides is becoming routine in many flocks. It is very risky to run 80-100 ewes per ram if the rams are of an unknown quantity. Even a slight fever in the two months before tupping can adversely affect fertility. Sperm take over 60 days to mature so rams must be

disease free for this period before tupping. A veterinary pre breeding examination will involve assessment of all the above and should include assessment of a semen sample.

Semen is collected using an electro-ejaculator, and is assessed on farm for density, gross motility, and progressive motility (swimming in the right direction). Smears will be made and examined for any sperm defects, although this is often done back at the practice.

Testing is best done 6-8 weeks prior to the breeding season. Too late, and any defects may not be able to be corrected in time. Too early, and the risk of a problem between testing and tupping becomes more likely.

More often than not, the cost of this annual pre breeding fertility examination is offset by the savings made in ram costs – see Table 1. Speak to your vet for further advice.



Your vet will check sperm motility on farm using a special microscope with a warm stage

## Further reading:

XLVets website - <http://www.xlvets.co.uk/sites/default/files/factsheet-files/breeding-ram.pdf>

AHDB - <http://beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Leaflet-Ram-MOT.pdf>

<http://beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Booklet-Fit-for-purpose-rams-A-blueprint-for-breeders.pdf>

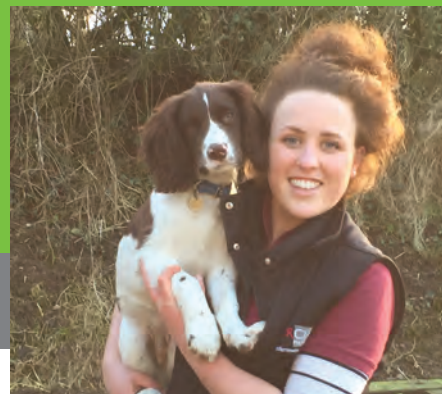
The Sheep Site <http://www.thesheepsite.com/news/488/ram-breeding-guidelines-renewed/>

There are a range of practical FarmSkills training courses for sheep farmers, to find courses running in your area visit [www.farmskills.co.uk](http://www.farmskills.co.uk).

# GRADUATE DIARY

Emily Francis, BSc MRCVS BVM&S

Torch Farm Vets



## About me

I graduated from the University of Edinburgh in Summer 2015 and started my farm vet internship programme at Torch Farm Vets the following October. I am part of a large team of 17 dedicated farm vets, four TB testers and a whole host of invaluable support staff based over five sites covering North Devon.

My interest in production animal medicine was well cemented before starting university and I have not once looked back on my decision to go straight into purely farm animal practice. Even on rainy days, which are a very common occurrence in Devon, I can't imagine doing anything else.

I took part in the XLVets farm graduate programme in late 2015 and it's really helped me get off the ground with clinical decision making by refreshing my knowledge and asking all those stupid new graduate questions! I met a great bunch of people and it's a great way to reach out to the wider XLVets community.

I have a particular interest in calf health, youngstock management and the prevention of perinatal lamb losses. I hope to learn a huge amount more in these areas in the following months.

Outside of work I have just joined a local cricket club to continue my keen interest in playing and coaching when I am not out walking my new Springer Spaniel 'Ted'.

## Putting theory into practice

The fields and moors of Devon are filled with munching ewes and lively lambs at the moment, whilst the farmers are busy silaging around them. It's difficult as a vet not to pass without even a hint of thought about what sort of anthelmintic regime they are on, even if we don't admit it!

It's fair to say that when I left university, I was keen on parasitology but my knowledge and ability to apply it was still very much a work in process. I found the most challenging aspect was learning all the trade names and instantly being able to conjure the active ingredient, and the parasites targeted, in my head. But as time goes on, hopefully the pace at which this happens is improving! I am very lucky here to have some parasitology experts on-hand who have provided me with a wealth of knowledge alongside my SCOPS manual, which I try to keep handy at all times. I have learnt that the simple task of running a faecal worm egg count can turn into a lengthy discussion about anthelmintic regimes, clinically affected animals, growth rates and hopefully some advice on how to improve things. In the farm vet world, the phrase 'playing with poo' has a lot more to it than it suggests! Resistance is a seriously hot topic at the moment and I am

appreciating more and more the usefulness of resistance testing on farms, especially with the use of white drenches, which farmers have been using for years and may not be aware of the efficacy of them. Hopefully as time goes on I will continue to help promote sustainable practices that result in healthy ewes and nice fat lambs.

It's not only my laboratory skills that have been put to the test recently, my surgery skills are frequently being brushed up on too! I used to find the thought of a caesar or displaced abomasum operation quite daunting but the more I do, the more comfortable I feel. My understanding and patient colleagues and the lighter evenings have definitely contributed to this! Am still waiting for that 2.00am nightmare caesar, however a feisty charolais heifer did put my ability to stitch-up a moving target to the test last week!



**TORCH**  
FARM VETS





# GRADUATE DIARY

Matt Raine, BVMedSci BVM BVS MRCVS

Wright & Morten



## About me

I graduated from Nottingham in July 2015, and started work here in Cheshire just a week later. Having grown up in a sheep and beef farming family in the North Pennines, I was always farm-focused through my time at university. I was lucky enough to get the job with Wright and Morten, working in solely farm practice. Our day-to-day work is largely dairy based, however there is a good balance of sheep and beef work mixed in, which I find particularly interesting.

In September 2015 I started the XLVets Farm Graduate Scheme which involved an eight-day crash course for all aspects farm vetting. This really spurred my interest in how we can offer more to our beef and sheep clients, as with the unpredictability of the livestock industry there is increased need for efficiency.

Outside of work I enjoy shooting, getting back up to the family farm and working my unruly cocker spaniel.



## Growing Experience

After a spring full of rain, flurries of snow and unpredictable temperatures, it is safe to say the weather has been less than ideal so far this year. Thankfully, now we have reached July, we have had a much needed spell of warm, sunny weather and rain and the grass has now grown. We can only hope that the days of blue skies and sun during May and into June were not the only signs of summer we see!

It was certainly a hectic spring for us, with both clients here in Cheshire and farmers from home reporting that lambing went well despite the weather. Many seem to have got on much quicker this year, with a significant number of triplets by all accounts! This meant we had an even more intense March and April which kicked off with a dramatic Easter weekend, with the on-call vet getting 25+ calls and needing to draft in extra help from one of the partners. We are one vet down at the moment, however we have been lucky to have a great locum to take some of the strain.

The six-month testing regime we have here in Cheshire means that a lot of our cattle farmers try to get their TB tests done at housing and turn-out, adding to the already heavy workload. It's at this time of year that we're even more pleased to have our dedicated TB testers, who take the biggest and most time consuming tests out of our hands, leaving us free to get to all those emergency calls. But enough about TB testing – it's certainly not the most exciting thing I've been getting up to!

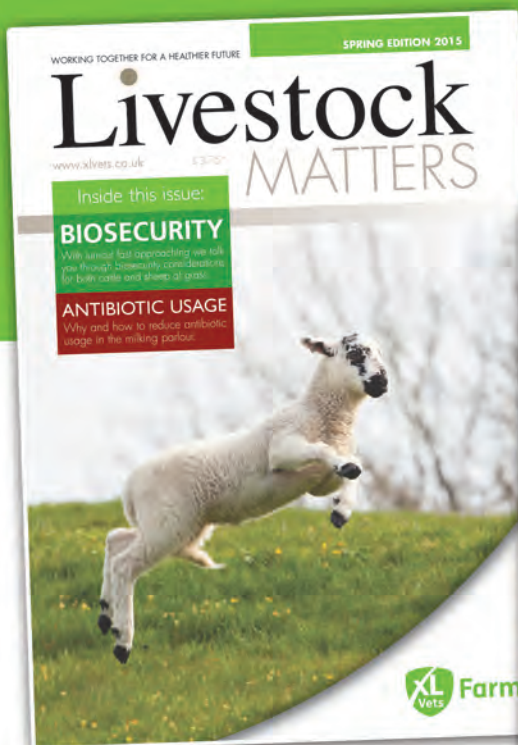
The number of caesareans I have been called to do has increased no-end since the last article was written. I am now feeling a lot more confident with cattle C-sections, and doing them on sheep can be quite good fun. The vast majority of these have been successful, with some outstanding calves and lambs being delivered live and kicking. There is no more rewarding sight than a big, strong calf standing next to you whilst you finish stitching up its mum's side – until it goes stumbling into your table, sending your surgical kit flying!

Lambing is now over and our suckler herds are getting through calving. It's been a great time of year for me, with my background in sheep and beef farming I'm really enjoying getting out to see some of our less frequently visited clients. As we head into the summer months I'm hoping we can keep in touch with these clients and see how these new arrivals have gone on to finishing or sale. It is always nice to see how they end up, and know that I played a part in them getting there.



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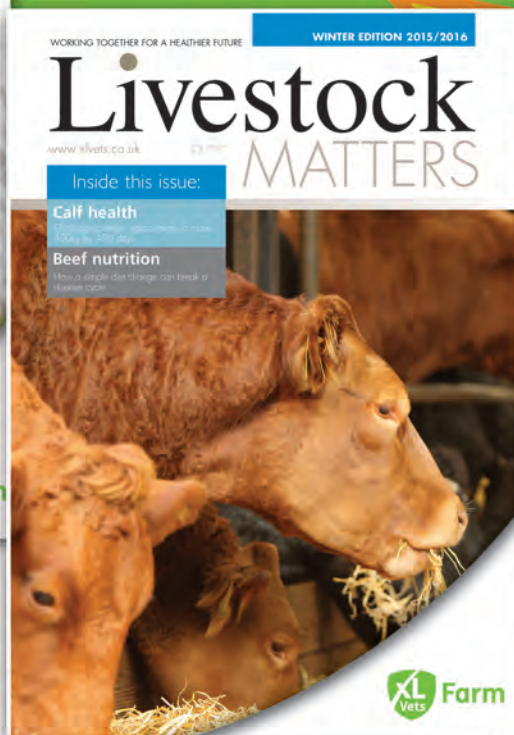
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Name

Mobile

Address

Email

Job Title

Postcode

Number of dairy cows

☐

Number of adult beef cattle

☐

Number of sheep

☐

Daytime Telephone Number

☐ I would like to receive further information from XLVets by e-mail

☐ I would like to receive further information from XLVets by SMS text message