

DEER WELFARE - A PRACTITIONER'S VIEW

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I. INTRODUCTION

In general veterinary practice, veterinarians have a professional obligation to ensure high standards of animal welfare are observed and practised. Within the deer industry welfare considerations have recently achieved greater prominence and some aspects of deer farming have come under closer scrutiny, particularly the harvesting of velvet antler. The moral, ethical and legal implications of velvet harvesting were well documented by Wilson 1989. However, there are also many other aspects pertaining to deer farming in which welfare considerations are of importance and are often overlooked. These include:

- i) Transport of live animals between farms and to the slaughter houses.
- ii) Poor shed designs which can cause physical injuries to stags e.g. legs caught behind gates, overcrowding of animals in pressure areas of a shed.
- iii) Movement of stock between paddocks on a farm when poor stockmanship can precipitate injuries on fences or during movement through gateways.
- iv) Accidental deprivation of livestock to water.
- v) Accidentally leaving stock in yards for several days.
- vi) Stags with broken velvet as a consequence of paddock injuries and more commonly from yarding or drafting.
- vii) Yarding of stags during the roar and the consequent physical injuries inflicted upon themselves due to invasion of their social territory.

This discussion will be confined to the stance adopted by my veterinary practice during the 1990 season to the issue of velvet harvesting, and how we attempted to satisfy our own ethical standards as well as demands made by farmers re the cost and type of service to them, and the supply of drugs. It was also a pro-active response to our clients of issues that had been generated from within the Deer Farmers Association regarding velvetting, and also to anticipated changes that were likely to occur within the Animal Welfare Act and within the Animal Remedies Board.

## II. PRACTICE BACKGROUND

Veterinary Services (H.B.) Ltd is a 9 man general practice centred in an intensive farming district. We service about 250 deer farmer clients located up to 60km from the clinics. In the 1990 velvetting season, about 9500 stags were velvetted over a 3 month period.

## III. PROCEDURES ADOPTED

Our approach to these issues included:

### 1. Farmer Education:-

1) A newsletter was sent to all deer farmers in September which contained some general advice on feeding of stags during velvet growth, recording button drop, management of groups of stags prior to velvetting, comments on facilities and equipment required for velvetting. This newsletter also notified the farmer of the two days of the week in which a vet would be servicing his particular area, and gave instructions regarding notification of our clinic of when the farmer had stags ready for cutting.

ii) Evening Seminar. A written invitation was sent to all deer farmers to attend an evening seminar on velvetting in which the following topics were discussed.

a) The normal velvetting procedure as carried out by our practice. This included a slide presentation and video of the actual velvetting procedure, targeted particularly at those new deer farmers who were to be velvetting for the first time. This also included comments on management of stags just prior to and during velvetting and the handling of velvet, setting and freezing of velvet, and recording techniques for production records.

b) A table of costs of velvetting was presented based on the previous year's actual costs to various monitor farms. (See table 1 & 2). This gave new farmers an indication of potential costs, and allowed existing velvet farmers to use them for their own comparisons.

c) Supply of drugs. Our practice policy on drug supply was also stated publicly i.e. rompun or other systemic sedative drugs would not be available for administration by a farmer, but local anaesthetic would be made available under certain strict conditions. The reasons for this stance were clearly stated.  
(See paragraph 4.0.)

TABLE 1.

	<u>VELVETTING COSTS FOR 1990 SEASON</u>						
	FARMER						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
No. of visits	25	19	9	15	11	12	3
Deer velvettted	402	195	248	159	438	231	7
Deer/visit	16	10.26	27.56	10.60	39.80	19.25	2.30
Fee/stag	\$ 4.24	\$ 5.35	\$3.68	\$ 4.94	\$3.39	\$ 3.99	\$12.30
Drugs/stag	\$ 5.89	\$ 5.41	\$5.00	\$ 6.31	\$4.29	\$ 6.12	\$ 6.61
Travel/stag	\$ 1.21	\$ 1.66	\$0.68	\$ 2.01	\$0.62	\$ 1.88	\$13.99
Total cost/stag	\$11.34	\$12.42	\$9.36	\$13.26	\$8.30	\$11.99	\$32.90

Note 1: These figures are in N.Z.\$'s, and are net of G.S.T. and any discounts applicable.

TABLE 2.

VELVETTING COSTS IN PERSPECTIVE

	FARMER A	FARMER B
Average price/kg of velvet	\$150.00	\$118.00
Income/stag less velvetting costs	\$319.53	\$264.00
Cost of velvetting in \$/kg of velvet	\$7.01	\$6.34
Cost of velvetting as % of velvet income	4.68%	5.37%

Note 1: The cost of selling velvet including commission, handling, insurance and GIB levy is about \$12.-15./kg.

Note 2: The cost of shearing sheep is 20-25% of value of wool on that sheep.

d) Market update. The National manager of the Wrightson's velvet pool Mr Phil Irwin, brought everyone up to date with the current market requirements including the latest GIB grading criteria and his reflections of the market place at that time. He also highlighted some areas of concern to him based on velvet that had been submitted to the pools previously e.g. spiker velvet cut below the coronet, a high proportion of broken velvet, and dirty velvet.

e) Animal Welfare Advisory Committee. Professor David Blackmore the Government appointed chairman of the A.W.A.C. focused farmers' attention on the meaning of welfare, and the issues that were to be considered under his appointment. This proved to be a popular address with the farmers, who concluded that there was some advocacy for the velvetting industry.

The overall objective of this evening seminar was to promote ourselves as being fully conversant and competent with the velvetting issues, and yet sensitive to the farmer's concerns over costs, and hopefully strengthen the vet/farmer relationship.

## 2. Vet Education:-

Aim of this exercise is to ensure that all vets are fully informed of everything related to velvetting immediately prior to the harvesting season.

- i) Areas of responsibility - a member of the practice liaises between the client and the deer industry to monitor any changes that may be needed in practice policy after debate between the veterinarians involved.
- ii) Veterinarians within the practice have open discussion prior to the velvetting season to ensure that velvetting techniques and advice given is reasonably standard.
- iii) Post-velvetting care - the post-velvetting care handout given to each farmer is a result of such a discussion and also contributes to our ethical requirements. (See appendix 1.)
- iv) Market update - a meeting is held a couple of weeks before velvetting with Mr Phil Irwin (National manager Wrightson velvet pool). He discusses in detail with the vets the GIB grading system and the market requirements, so that the vets can give the best informed opinion to farmers when assessing the harvesting time of velvet.

3. Practice Management:-

- i) Weekly meetings - a one hour meeting is held one day per week before work where fine tuning of day to day running of the practice can be attended to. It is also an opportunity for field veterinarians to communicate with each other, as when everyone is busy one may see very little of your colleagues.
- ii) Geographical areas - prior to the velvetting season the whole practice area is divided into convenient geographical areas which will be serviced two days per week by a veterinarian. (Mon & Thurs, Tues & Fri). The farmer is notified of these service days and given instruction at the beginning of the season re notifying the clinic of stags to velvet a day in advance. The reasons for this are obvious, viz.
  - a) Two days velvetting/week for any velvetting herd is more than adequate to attain velvet yield and cost efficiencies. However, any farmer who wishes to cut velvet, with timing down to the last hour or two, will also be serviced, and this really relates to those involved in velvet for competitions.
  - b) Encourages farmers to be organized, and in most cases preferred time schedules can be set to suit the farmer.
  - c) Reduced travel cost for farmer.
  - d) More efficient organization for clinic.
  - e) Better utilization of time for vet i.e. more charged hours and less travel time between calls.
- iii) Charging - the charging out by all vets is standardized to ensure consistent charges to farmers from different vets. This can obviously be overridden in exceptional cases. The charge out system also gives advantage to larger and organised clients.
- iv) Vets management - vets with experience in handling deer tend to be used mainly for the velvetting, with some getting more exposure than others.

4. Conditions for prescription of local anaesthetic. (L.A.)

The following criteria are a pre-requisite for a prescription for local anaesthetic.

- i) Bona-fida client.
- ii) The farmer has a velvetting herd of reasonable size. We will not accept that a farmer with only a few stags (e.g. 2-5 breeding stags) has enough experience in handling the animals to become proficient in the use of L.A. and the velvetting procedure.

- iii) The farmer must be prepared for their local vet to make a visit to the farm to inspect the velvetting facility and its' operation. The following aspects are covered:
  - a) Entry of stag into crush - ensure no broken velvet, sharp objects, operator safety.
  - b) Safety of the crush - that the animal can sit comfortably in the crush, no projections that will injure the animal, and that the release mechanism is working properly.
  - c) Restraint methods - chin strap, noose tourniquets and access for operator.
  - d) L.A. administration technique - demonstration by vet of correct procedure and observation of farmer doing the same.
  - e) Observance of delay time - for L.A. to work and recognition of pain response in animal.
  - f) Cutting of velvet - ensure farmer knows the correct position to cut velvet and observe him performing this procedure.
  - g) Release of stag from crush and shed.
- iv) Duration of prescription.  
The prescription is made out for the current season, and renewal in the following season involves the same procedure.
- v) Register of drugs supplied.  
At the clinic a register of prescriptions is kept. Information kept includes:  
Name,  
no. of stags to be velvetted,  
estimate of quantity of L.A. required,  
amount of drug supplied,  
date collected,  
veterinarian's signature.
- vi) Client signatory/contract.  
Ideally the farmer should sign a declaration which stated very clearly the parameters of intentional use and responsibilities of the privilege upon which the prescription has been made. This would include:
  - a) Use on own property.
  - b) Not supplied to other properties.
  - c) Used for velvetting only and according to instructions given.
  - d) Duration of prescription.
  - e) Acceptance of responsibility.
  - f) Acknowledgement of storage and security of drugs/syringes/needles.

- v11) Comment - some farmers adopted the use of local anaesthetic with physical restraint of the stag in a crush for velvetting spikers, 2 year olds and for regrowth. There were five farmers who wanted to velvet all mature stags through crushes. I estimate that about 1000 stags were velvetted using this method.
- It was also interesting to note that some farmers who used this method are intending to revert to vets velvetting in the coming season because the procedure of velvetting is a lot faster using chemical restraint of stags, and that it does not necessitate the hiring of extra staff by the farmer.

#### IV CONCLUSIONS

The philosophies of the velvetting debate can and will continue between deer farmers, veterinarians, welfare activists, marketers etc., but the reality is some stance which is workable and acceptable to all parties. From a practitioner point of view, we can still ask many questions as to whether the policy we adopted was correct, but the most important point is that we were comfortable with the practicality of our system.

We have attempted to make the farmer aware of his welfare responsibilities via newsletters, evening seminar and on a vet to farmer relationship. As practitioners we have tried to adopt a professional approach to velvetting, ensuring we are all very competent and conversant with all aspects of velvetting, sensitive to our client demands, and organised in ourselves to give clients the best service and advice we can. After all, it is the payment for service which is the basis of our livelihoods!!

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REFERENCES: "Velvet Harvesting: moral, ethical & legal aspects".  
WILSON P.R. (1989) - Proc. Deer Branch N.Z.V.A.  
course for veterinarians  
no.6 1989.



APPENDIX 1

VETERINARY SERVICES (H.B.) LTD,  
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INSTRUCTION TO FARMERS FOLLOWING VELVETTING OF STAGS

Following the develvetting of stags, the farmer should check that:

1. All tourniquets have been removed from the pedicles before the stag leaves the shed.
2. Stags are returned to a recovery paddock as soon as possible. This should be clean pasture with no creeks, drains or dams to which the animals have access until fully recovered from the anaesthetic.
3. If the stags sit down they are in a normal sitting position and not lying on their sides.
4. Stags should be made to stand up at regular intervals and to move around.

It is the farmer's responsibility to keep the stags under continuous surveillance until they have fully recovered from the anaesthetic. Factors which indicate the animal is still under the effects of the anaesthetic drug include:

1. Unsteadiness on their feet and unco-ordinated gait.
2. Lolling of the tongue out the side of the mouth.
3. Excessive periods of lying down.
4. Excessive saliva coming from the mouth.
5. Stag appears bloated.

The stag will have recovered from the anaesthetic when he is grazing normally, has a co-ordinated gait, and whether sitting or standing the head is above the shoulder of the stag.

If the farmer is in any doubt about a stag during the recovery period, he should contact the attending veterinarian immediately.

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