

## Continuing the practitioners role in deer tuberculosis eradication

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### Abstract

Historically, veterinarians have played a significant role in the development of the Bovine Tb control programme in deer. They were involved in efficacy studies of the various primary and ancillary TB tests that are used in the current scheme. They helped initiate, and were involved in the voluntary deer Tb testing programme and the subsequent integration into the current Animal Health Board (AHB) strategy for eradication of Tb. They initiated and developed the specifications utilised by both Quality Assurance Programmes used by deer Tb test service providers.

The future role of veterinary practitioners revolves around

1. Their continued performance of Tb testing of deer and advice on the outcomes of those tests to the high standards specified in the Deer Tb testing QAP.
2. Their utilisation of the skills they have, and the relationship that veterinarians have with their farmer clients as primary animal health advisors and as the preferred information source by farmers in general. There is a need to foster a joint sense of ownership of the national Tb eradication programme in order for it to make ongoing progress.

Veterinarians have a significant role as educators and communicators. For this role to progress they must have developed a full understanding of the goals and policies of the Animal Health Board. The current process of development of the new 2001 Pest Management Strategy provides a unique opportunity for this to occur as veterinarians are being given options for consultation and submissions into the content of that strategy. The recent NZVA survey about the Tb control programme was used to form the basis of the NZVA submission into the initial discussion paper currently being circulated by National Quality Veterinary Services Ltd.

### Introduction

Historically veterinarians have played a significant role in the development of Bovine Tb Control programmes in deer. They were involved in original work in efficacy studies of the various primary and ancillary Tb tests used in the current scheme. They helped set up the original voluntary Tb testing programme for the deer industry and facilitated its subsequent inclusion into the current strategy.

Veterinary practitioners helped define the test specifications that form the basis of both Quality Assurance Programmes used by testing agencies today. It is through the utilisation of these specifications that veterinary practitioners fulfil most of their current role in deer Tb control. The NZVA Deer Tb Testing Quality Assurance Programme manual provides practitioners with practical aspects of test application and interpretation, and sufficient epidemiology and pathology background to allow the provision of sound advice in the event of finding bovine Tb.

When developing the NZVA Deer Tb Testing Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) it was envisaged that veterinarians would be able to "add value" for their deer farmer clients by guiding strategies to help control and eradicate Tb on farm and within districts. This has not occurred to the level that anywhere near reaches the potential that some vets can provide.

## **Where to from here?**

The ongoing role for veterinary practitioners revolves around three functions

- 1 The continued performance of testing of deer to the high standards specified in the Deer Tb Testing QAP
- 2 The utilisation of the veterinary practitioner role as communicators and educators to try and develop a joint sense of ownership of the National Tb Eradication Programme.
3. Greater active involvement on-farm in providing the one-on-one technical advice to clients with Tb-infected deer herds

## **On farm Tb testing**

Veterinarians Tb test the majority of deer in New Zealand. Through a combination of Tb testing and rigorous vector control the number of deer herds on movement control is decreasing in most areas. However, the lower the prevalence of Tb the harder it becomes to find fewer cases especially in larger herds. This also means that the percentage of false positives will increase. This tends to result in a sense of farmer disillusion with the tests. It is therefore important that the veterinary practitioner continues to support the concept that the mid cervical standard skin test (MCT) is still the most time- and cost-efficient, fastest and effective method of finding Tb in deer herds. This is the underlying aim of the AHB testing strategy, as opposed to finding the best technique for getting a herd clear for sale or annual/ biennial surveillance.

Keeping up to date on policy and local area changes, and continued understanding of Tb test specifications, application and interpretation therefore still remains a primary responsibility for veterinarians working in the deer industry.

## **How can the communication role be expanded?**

Farmers regard veterinarians as being a primary source of information and advice on farm. It is therefore a logical extension to utilise this role in the area of Tb control.

The Animal Health Board is currently distributing a discussion paper on its proposed next Pest Management Strategy starting in 2001. All stakeholders including veterinarians are being offered the opportunity to contribute to the outcomes of this paper. By having input to the resultant new strategy there is a chance for veterinarians to have a greater understanding and "ownership" of the goals and policies that the Animal Health Board identify.

The outcomes of the recent NZVA survey of veterinary practitioners on their understanding and views on the current and future strategies were included in the NZVA submission to this discussion paper. The AHB is currently running a series of meetings around the country to discuss the proposed new strategy with all stakeholders. This will provide a unique opportunity for veterinarians to have input into the consultation process and also to gain a greater understanding of projected outcomes.

Major gains towards AHB targets can only be made with farmer cooperation and "ownership" of the Tb problem in their own locality. Many of the criticisms leveled at AHB policies result from a lack of understanding of the underlying reasons for these policies. A classic example of this is the animal identification system recently implemented. Despite significant publicity prior to policy implementation there were still many problems especially relating to the practical application of various tagging systems. Encouragement and facilitation of problem solving by veterinarians is a constructive method of helping implement these changes.

Other areas that veterinarians can assist in lifting farmer awareness are

- Tb declaration card and its use pre-movement and in buying decisions
- Perception of the programme, its effectiveness and progress towards goals

- Understanding of local movement restrictions and test requirements
- Confidence in, and use of the various tests available, especially following test positives
- Planning of on-farm management decisions relating to grazing, buying of stock, and test timing

### **Maintenance of the Communication Role**

- The manual used in the Deer Tb Testing Quality Assurance Scheme forms the basis of the information that can be used in the above scenarios. Specific information is updated when changes occur, such as the National Tb Operational Plan (NTOp) and the Regional Tb Operational Plans (RTOp) which are usually reviewed annually. Other updates to policy or specifics of the QAP are supplied via bulletins/mail-outs to participating veterinarians.
- National Quality Veterinary Services Ltd (NQVS) has undertaken to supply a communication resource between the AHB and veterinarians, and also runs the Tb Quality Standards Committee (TQSC) which maintains and administers the Deer and Cattle QAPs.
- Regional Animal Health Committees (RAHCs) have a role to formulate regional Tb Control policy, and advise the AHB on local problems and activity. Each of these committees has a veterinarian involved. One of the roles of this representative is to provide feedback to the other veterinarians within the region on any matters relating to Tb control within that area.
- AgriQuality offices located within each region hold copies of the RTOps and are able to supply up to date information of movement policy, individual farm status, test allocation protocol, and statistics on progress within regions.
- The AHB now has a website running at [www.ahb.org.nz](http://www.ahb.org.nz). This site holds all current policy information as well as the NTOp and its updates so can be used as a reference source at any time.

### **Future Funding For Tb Control**

The discussion paper for the review of the Pest Management Strategy outlines a number of alternatives that potentially affect the veterinary role in Tb control to a large degree. At present within the deer industry (unlike the beef or dairy cattle industries) farmers pay for all testing on a user pays basis and the NZGIB fund the generic components of the scheme via a levy. The alternatives being discussed are:

- Maintenance of the status quo for deer herds where all surveillance and movement testing is user pays, but the cattle industry funds both via collective levy.
- Moving the deer industry into either a partial collective funding arrangement (for surveillance testing (i.e. annual/biennial whole herd testing) with movement testing user pays OR totally funding testing via collective levy like the cattle system.
- Moving the cattle industry into a similar system to the current deer industry one with either partial or total user-pays options in place.

The outcome of this potential funding decision could significantly alter the veterinary role in Tb control for deer herds in the future. The third option presented above where the deer industry maintains its funding on a user pays basis, and the cattle industry moves into a similar system, will increase the ability of vets to add value to the service they provide for their farmer clients in terms of advice and management on farm. It will also provide the farmer with competitive options for testing service delivery, without the huge increases in levy levels proposed in the strategy discussion document.

Adoption of the second option of partial or total collective funding for Tb control will potentially see veterinary practitioner involvement decrease. This is unless the AHB is prepared for the option of

allowing full contestability for testing services on a regional or national basis, or having farmer choice of testing agent, and deal with two or more representative suppliers of these services

### **Conclusion**

Apart from the ongoing role of Tb test application and interpretation on farm, the best potential utilisation of veterinary practitioner skills in the future is as an educator and motivator to farmers. They need to help convince farmers to take on responsibility for their own part in the on going effort to control or eradicate Tb in New Zealand

The ability to successfully achieve this is somewhat dependent on the opportunities veterinarians will have, and access to, Tb testing following the adoption of the next Pest Management Strategy. The decision as to what funding formula is adopted has an integral role in this outcome