

WHAT IS YOUR CLIENT THINKING?

Working in partnership with our vets

This month, Lesley Prior from Tellenby Superfine Merino discusses how working with two veterinary teams helps keep her pioneering flock healthy and happy

WHAT CAN HELP YOUR APPROACH

- Keep an open mind. Farming is changing, and livestock enterprises are changing with it. Be prepared to think differently and take an interest – learn from, and with, your clients about what they are doing and how best to do it.
- Be honest if you don't know the answer and be prepared to work with the client to find out. They might know more than you or your colleagues.
- Don't assume a farming client will put economics before welfare – have the conversation.
- Learn from failures but remember to celebrate your successes, and those of your clients – you may well have been a major contributor.



WE run a Merino sheep enterprise in Devon. Merinos are extremely rare in the UK and, while sheep are sheep, there are significant differences in management. They are elite wool growers, not meat sheep, and they live long productive lives – often lambing beyond the age of 10.

Wethers are our top wool growers, so our dry flock is a mix of adult males and females plus lambs from the previous year. We also run a large ram group, slowly selecting ram lambs from each year's drop over their first year of life.

We work with two veterinary practices: one is our day-to-day vet team, providing routine care and emergency cover, and the other is our specialist artificial breeding team. Our vets have an augmented role here – acting as sounding boards, shoulders to cry on and providers of the occasional pat on the back when we get things right.

Claire is our regular farm vet, and we have a monthly on-farm clinic session where we go through our routine health plan and discuss any issues. She is also responsible for our maedi visna accreditation and scrapie monitoring scheme compliance. Regular visits mean she knows the flock and is in a good position to spot potential problems

as they arise.

Our high-end retail customers want to know every detail of how our sheep are cared for, from birth to death. As such, we question every intervention we perform, wondering if we can do it better. Claire is integral to this process – discussing what is practical, desirable and legal. Pain relief at tail docking and castration are recent issues we've been tackling, and we are considering what our options might be if either procedure should be banned in the future.

We also export occasionally, and Claire is our official veterinarian for this. Anyone who exports knows how complex and downright baffling the bureaucracy can be, and working with her on this has been a huge help – two heads are definitely better than one.

Our artificial breeding team is led by Mike. Over the past 15 years, we have imported semen and embryos from top Australian studs – sourcing carefully to achieve our objectives of growing wool of around 16.5µm from sheep producing at least 10 per cent of their bodyweight in wool.

Together, we have refined our methods over the years, using a mix of protocols from the UK and Australia and trialling new things, such as controlled internal drug

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releases, as they become available. Again, animal welfare is the top priority and using people who know our sheep well means protocols can be tailored to best suit their needs.

Mike and the team have been involved in our breeding from day one, and I know they feel a great sense of satisfaction at the way things have matured. Artificial breeding using imported genetics is a hugely expensive undertaking, and we all feel the pain when things don't go well, as they sometimes don't, but working together long term means we all know we've done our best.

Being a pioneer is a lonely road, and having our vets share that journey with us means a great deal. We've occasionally been on the point of giving up when something has gone wrong, and having the support of both vet teams at such times has been key to our decision to continue – they take a longer view when we can only see the problem in front of us. We feel very lucky to have them working with us.

DO YOU WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

If you know a client who might be interested in writing for us, please contact us at vet.clientview@bmj.com. Any contributions will be assessed by the column's veterinary coordinator, Zoe Belshaw.