

Flock Health Clubs – have they been a successful initiative?

*Flock Health Clubs (FHCs) are a new initiative started by Flock Health Ltd., in an effort to improve communication and relationships between sheep farmers and veterinarians and to offer sheep farmers access to cost effective veterinary services. Over the past three years FHCs have been initiated in practices by interested vets. Anecdotally they appear to be successful, but there has been no consultation with vets or farmers to confirm this. The Innovation for Sustainable Sheep and Goat Production in Europe (iSAGE) project gave **Marion Johnson** and **Lisa Arguile** (ORC), **Nicola Noble** (ORC/National Sheep Association) and **Wendy Jones** (National Sheep Association) the opportunity to interview participating vets and farmers as to their experiences.*

Six years ago, a study¹ revealed that two thirds of sheep farmers only contacted their vet in an emergency. Farmers felt that amongst vets there was a lack of interest and expertise in sheep and an inconsistent service. Many vets had no idea of the economics underpinning sheep production. An independent survey of 2,500 sheep producers² had found that 67% of farmers only used their veterinarians in an emergency to treat sick sheep and only 20% had regular contact. Between 2008 and 2013 little had changed to alter the notion that veterinary help was a last resort.

The aim of the Flock Health Club (FHC) is to promote farmer interaction with a sheep-focused vet resulting in increased sheep expertise (both vet and farmer) and better relationships between farmers and their vets. Through member evenings and discussions information is available to farmers which will increase their awareness of best health practices, generate insights for improvements in their systems and provide opportunities for benchmarking both from a production and a financial perspective.

In return for a monthly subscription paid to their practice, farmers receive access to regular discussion groups and meetings with other FHC members. Some practices offer additional benefits for those who subscribe to the FHC membership such as free visits, free faecal egg counts (FEC) and discounts on services ranging from fertility testing to postmortems. All FHCs run lambing sessions in an effort to improve lamb survival.

Veterinary opinions of Flock Health Clubs

Fifteen vets who have run FHCs at their practices for over a year were interviewed. All were universally positive. FHC farmer members were regarded as forward thinking and innovative, actively looking for advice and generally in the top 5-10% of farmers in the area.

Every vet practice felt that they had a good relationship with FHC members, often better than with general sheep clients. There was more communication, as FHC members were more likely to call them than the average sheep client and actively seek advice. They were engaged, spent more time talking and were keen to improve their flocks.

Several vets felt that as general sheep clients realised there was an interest in sheep in the practice, backed by robust knowledge and a desire to get to the bottom of health issues, they engaged more as well. One vet commented that their confidence in treating sheep had increased with their involvement in FHC and this spilled over into their interactions with sheep farming clients. FHC members had an improved sheep health knowledge and were more aware of the impacts of health issues such as lameness or parasites on their farms.



Several clubs were careful when they held meetings to schedule them to fit the farmers' calendars and one noted that if there was an external speaker or a practical demonstration attendance was higher. Ten clubs had a meeting attendance rate of over 75%, with six achieving 100%. A wide range of topics are covered in meetings, often reflecting the seasonal challenges or a local health issue. Farmers in most practices were consulted as to topics of interest to them and venues on farm. The majority of practices identified that the provision of some sort of meal contributed to the success and congeniality of their FHC.

All agreed that smaller numbers encouraged interaction and farmers got to know each other. One vet felt that if the numbers increased the farmers wouldn't get the attention they deserved. Several groups recognised that the farmers that attended were of high calibre and they tried to discourage individuals who were opinionated, knew it all and didn't interact well with a group.

When vets were asked if they had seen changes in their members' flocks since joining FHC all agreed that they had; the most common changes cited were in parasite management, lameness and reduced lamb losses. Two vets commented that the members of their FHC were in the top end of farmers in their area and thus they had not seen much in the way of change as their management was good already.

The main negative aspect of running an FHC was the time it took up in preparation and facilitation. A number of vets expressed a feeling of running out of topics and being out of their comfort zone if exploring other topics. It was acknowledged that information could be shared but the presenting vet still had to become familiar with the topic and format of someone else's work.

One practice felt that vets weren't natural facilitators and needed to learn, another expressed a degree of frustration that they perceived a message from an external speaker was always received better by farmers, even though the vet had given the same information. Keeping meetings small and congenial was important as the frustrations caused by 'time wasters' and 'difficult clients' were then reduced.

Vets also pointed out that FHCs motivated them to attend



other sheep courses and professional groups to keep their knowledge up to date.

No vet felt that there was a disadvantage to running a FHC.

Farmer opinions of Flock Health Clubs

Farmers who participated in this survey represented a diverse selection of farmers, from those with 10 breeding ewes to those with 3600 breeding ewes, on acreages ranging from 20 to 1500 acres and more. FHCs are open to all and the range of farmers from small holders and pedigree breeders through to large commercial operations suggests that the opportunity is being widely taken up.

Most of the farmers surveyed felt that FHC membership fees provide value for money. The participating vet practice governs the fee structure; therefore, fees may vary between areas and practices. A number of respondents highlighted that the additional benefits, such as reduced fees for parasite management and a number of free visits, provided by practices to FHC members were an attraction. The range of incentives and benefits varied with club/practice and were thus not universal. Some farmers indicated they wanted more benefits with their membership, but they may have belonged to a less generous practice.

Farmers recognised and acknowledged the opportunity to update thinking, develop and exchange ideas and knowledge with other likeminded farmers and vets at FHC meetings. Financial benefits mentioned included discounted medications and free FEC tests that in turn reduced reliance on anthelmintics and associated costs. FHC meetings also provided the opportunity for farmers to mix socially with like-minded farmers. Many farmers highlighted that the main advantage associated with their FHC membership was the ability to develop and exchange knowledge between other farmers and their club vet, their relationship with whom had improved. There was a clear appetite for more meetings, the ability to hear talks, consider benchmarking and visit more farms.

Consideration of dates and timings when setting meetings was identified as a potential improvement that could be made to planning FHCs, as was customising meetings for large and small farms and flexibility of venues. Farmers commented that they really enjoyed opportunities to discuss flock issues together and wanted more opportunities to do so.

Echoing the comments of vets, farmers felt that FHC membership had improved their knowledge of sheep issues, indicating positive changes had occurred within their management practices, and many members also indicated that they had seen noticeable positive changes in their flock since becoming a member. Documenting changes at this stage can be difficult as personal knowledge can change quickly but management and flock improvements may take time to activate and implement.

It is clear that a large proportion of participants felt they were benefiting from the scheme.

Again mirroring vet comments, the majority of farmers felt that being part of a FHC had improved their relationship with the club vet. This has come about as a result of increased farmer-vet interactions, and the vets' own interest in sheep. One of the goals of the founders of FHCs was

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to increase the number of vets who had specialist sheep knowledge, a vision that coincides with farmer feedback highlighting a preference for engaging with a vet who is interested in sheep. Farmers agreed the likelihood of them calling a vet had increased, irrespective of the health issue, and as farmers took a more proactive role in health management – turning to preventative measures rather than emergency management of an issue when it arises.

No farmer felt there was a disadvantage to FHC membership.

Ancillary environmental benefits arise from the more considered use of anthelmintics and antibiotics contributing to the long-term sustainability of medications available to the industry. Further benefits accrue from changes in grazing and feeding practices, farmers being more aware of alternatives to their current management practices, and the opportunities and help available for instituting changes. Simple considerations such as changing to a breed more suited to the locale or careful use of external inputs such as concentrates and minerals, should all contribute in both the short and long term to economic sustainability.

Conclusions

FHCs provide an opportunity for farmers to update themselves on changing practices and new techniques within the sheep sector. Involvement in running an FHC also encourages the vet to update themselves on the latest research/knowledge that impacts sheep production and to pass this information on to farmers.

FHCs have been shown to be an important means of widening farmers' knowledge both from delivery of a given topic and discussion with like-minded farmers. Improvements in animal health, nutrition, awareness of housing and reduction of disease will all contribute to animal welfare through improvements in flock management and ultimately flock status.

Veterinary surgeons are more involved with sheep clients and farmers are receiving a better more knowledgeable service.

Are FHCs a success – vets and farmers agree – absolutely!

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References

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