Progress in the eradication of footrot

C. R. Toop
Progress in the Eradication of Footrot

An A.B.C. Country Hour Broadcast by C. R. TOOP, B.V.Sc., Chief Veterinary Surgeon

At the present time there are only 28 properties under quarantine for footrot in Western Australia and there is reason to expect that the incidence will be further reduced before the end of the current year. It is 10 years now since action was first taken in this State for the control of this disease and some excellent progress has been made in the meantime.

In the initial stages it was only possible to police the markets so as to limit the spread of infection from property to property, and to undertake a very limited amount of eradication work.

Later however, the present methods of control were developed and proved effective and they have since been used to good advantage. Footrot had already been scheduled as a notifiable disease and there was authority under the Stock Diseases Act regulations to quarantine affected properties, to regulate the movement of sheep from these properties to markets, and to require affected sheep found in saleyards to be sold for slaughter. It was only necessary therefore to apply the existing regulations—firmly, but with common-sense and discretion—and there was no need for recourse to special legislation.

QUARANTINE YARDS

It was during this period too that quarantine yards were established at Midland Junction which enabled affected sheep to be sold separately from clean sheep without making contact with them and without passing over the same ground. Provision was also made for the cleansing and disinfection of road and railway trucks used for the delivery of affected sheep to the Quarantine Siding, which ensured that any sheep that were afterwards transported would not be exposed to infection.
CAMPAIGN INTENSIFIED

By 1954 an adequately trained and experienced staff had been recruited and it then became possible to launch a full-scale campaign against the disease. Since that time footrot has been vigorously attacked wherever it has been found to exist, and it has been possible to undertake eradication measures in every known affected flock. In addition, a constant watch has been kept both over markets and individual flocks for the detection of new and undisclosed infections. The methods employed in the eradication of footrot are now so well known and have been re-stated so often that they need only to be mentioned in passing.

They are based upon the knowledge that the infection is carried in the feet of the sheep and that it is unable to persist in the soil for more than about seven days. Thus by removing all sheep which are carrying the infection from a flock and turning those which remain into a paddock which has been spelled for a fortnight, it is possible to eradicate the disease.

SPRING, THE CRITICAL SEASON

Footrot is most active in the spring when the lush pastures and warm, moist conditions are favourable to the rapid spread of the infection. With the advent of summer however, the disease subsides and ceases to spread; many of the cases clear up spontaneously, but a variable proportion—usually not very large—remain as "carriers," and unless removed, will give rise to a fresh outbreak in the following spring. During this period the infection sinks to its lowest ebb and can be most successfully attacked.

Thus, in Western Australia, summer eradication programmes have been regularly organised in all affected districts taking full advantage of the long, dry season which extends over a period of four to six months.

This work has involved the paring and examination of every foot of every sheep in every affected flock followed by the removal of the "carriers" either for slaughter, or for segregation and treatment as a hospital flock, and it has been necessary so as to ensure that no carrier has escaped detection, to repeat this procedure on two, and sometimes three occasions during the course of the summer. Alternatively, whole flocks have been sold for slaughter and replaced by clean sheep after spelling the property for a fortnight, and where it is practicable to adopt this procedure, it provides the surest and simplest method of eradication.

AN ENCOURAGING RECORD

Since the campaign against footrot began, 659 affected flocks have been quarantined and 631 of them have been freed of infection by one or other of these methods and released from quarantine.

In the Bridgetown-Boyup Brook area where the disease was widespread, only six flocks now remain under quarantine out of a total of 190 which were found to be affected, and the corresponding figures for other districts are:—Albany-Mt. Barker, 4 out of 98, Armadale-Harvey, 6 out of 84, Bunbury-Busselton-Donnybrook, 9 out of 90, Narrogin-Williams, nil out of 50, Kojonup-Katanning 2 out of 31 and Perth-Avon Valley-Gingin, 1 out of 55.

The Geraldton, Moora, Kellarberrin and Narrogin districts have been freed of infection and at Geraldton where there were 40 affected flocks and the disease was rife on the Greenough Flats for many years, no case has been seen since 1955.

The numbers of new infections coming under notice have also progressively decreased. There were 93 in 1955, 70 in 1956, 62 in 1957 and only 25 in 1958. Should this downward trend continue and a substantial proportion of the 28 flocks now under quarantine be freed of infection—and there is every reason to believe that this will be the case—the outlook in 1960 could be very encouraging.

GUARDED OPTIMISM

It should not, however, be thought that total eradication is in sight, and while new outbreaks continue to occur even though they may be few and far between and in the main confined to small flocks, it would be dangerous to make any prediction as to the final outcome. Isolated pockets of infection without doubt still exist and until every one of these has been located and accounted for, complete eradication will not be possible.

It should be appreciated also, that footrot is an insidious disease which may be
dormant in the feet for several years only to declare itself and become active and widespread when sheep are brought into an environment which favours the propagation of the infection. It can however, be claimed that the disease has been brought under control and reduced to a level where it is now of little or no economic importance.

AVOIDING RE-INFECTION

Farmers who have experienced an outbreak of footrot and the associated heavy losses, should not need to be reminded of the importance of preventing the reintroduction of the infection into their flocks, or of the precautionary measures which should be observed, but every flockowner in the higher rainfall areas which are liable to footrot would be well advised to take the same precautions.

Replacement sheep should be purchased in the dry inland areas where footrot is not known to occur, and it should be insisted that they were bred in the district and that no introduced or dealers' sheep which might contain "carriers" are included in the consignment. They should be run as a separate flock and kept under observation during the winter and spring months, so that should an outbreak occur, it can be promptly eradicated without involving the rest of the sheep on the property.

Rams should be carefully examined for the presence of foot lesions at the time of purchase and unless required for immediate service they should be held in strict isolation and kept under close observation throughout the flush period of the year. Imported rams are not only required to be certified as free of footrot, but also to have come from properties on which the disease is neither known nor suspected to exist, and while there has been strict compliance with these conditions by the exporting States, the additional precautions of a careful examination of the feet, and a period of isolation are advisable.

Community dips should be avoided and outside sheep should not be allowed to be brought on to the property for dipping, crutching or shearing.

Boundary fences should be maintained in a sheep-proof condition so as to exclude any possibility of the introduction of infection from adjoining properties.

With the restrictions now in force, it is unlikely that sheep will be exposed to infection during transit, but the risk cannot altogether be ignored, and it would be a worthwhile precaution to put all newly purchased sheep through a formalin footbath before releasing them on to the property.

Finally, should any evidence of lameness be observed in the flock, the matter should be promptly reported to the District Stock Inspector. It will most likely have resulted from foot abscess, separated wall or the penetration of the feet by doublegees, but it is important that an early diagnosis should be established. Should footrot be found to be present and the owner is fully co-operative, complete eradication will, in most cases be possible within 12 months.

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