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## Sydney Morning Herald Coverage

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Mulesing saves sheep from blowfly strike but is often seen as cruel. Daniel Lewis reports on smart new methods to replace it by 2010.

THE mighty Cojak sadly passed away recently, but his offspring could yet solve the Australian wool industry's most divisive headache. Cojak was a merino ram from South Australia's Calcookara Stud.

He didn't have a bald head like the famous 1970s television detective Theo Kojak, played by Telly Savalas, but a naturally bald backside. This unusual trait made Cojak a celebrity in the wake of the massive mulesing debate that started to rock the wool industry in 2004.

That year the US-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals started a campaign that saw clothing businesses in the United States and Europe boycott Australian wool because of the alleged cruelty of mulesing. There were gruesome billboards and celebrities such as Toni Collette, Pink, Martina Navratilova and Chrissie Hynde to spread the anti-mulesing message, although Collette and Pink changed their tune after the wool industry got in touch to point out mulesing saved sheep from the agony of blowfly strike.

Used since the 1930s, mulesing is the cutting away of skin from around a lamb's backside so it develops a bald breech area. That stops the build-up of urine and faeces in wool that is a paradise for blowflies to lay their eggs in. After the maggots hatch they burrow into the sheep's flesh and can kill it.

But in the wake of the 2004 campaign, the Australian wool industry announced that it would end mulesing by 2010. There had already been promising research into alternatives such as botox-like injections that achieved the same result as mulesing by stretching and smoothing the skin.

Cojak offered hope of a genetic solution as well.

In early episodes, TV's Kojak smoked heavily, but to kick the habit he famously started sucking lollipops. The wool industry, however, is still racing to find a lollipop that's sweet enough for anxious farmers by 2010.

Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) - the grower-owned organisation funded by a 2 per cent levy on every bale of Australian wool to conduct research - is spending millions on non-surgical mulesing alternatives. Its chairman, Ian McLachlan, insists alternatives will be ready to honour the 2010 deadline.

This week a roadshow of wool industry leaders has been swinging through rural NSW giving assurances and demonstrating to farmers where how the different technologies have progressed.

When the wool industry made its 2010 pledge it looked like an injectable solution would be the answer. A natural protein called collagenase could be applied to the breech to leave the



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area smooth and free of wool. However, the imported cattle byproduct was declared a biosecurity threat because it could have brought in mad cow disease.

Jules Dorrian, Innovation's blowfly control manager, says a new injectable is now being worked on that has as its active ingredient cetrimide, widely used in antiseptics, so there will be no biosecurity issues. She believes training can overcome safety concerns with the application guns. Innovation hopes the injectable will be commercially available by 2009.

Meanwhile, industry hopes rest on plastic clips which stretch the skin in the tail and breech area. Dorrian says the clips will be the first alternative to hit the market. After several weeks the clips and gathered skin which has died fall off to leave a bare breech. Last year the clips were tried by about 80 growers and this spring there will be a trial involving more than 700. The plan is to have the clips commercially available next year.

A key challenge is to come up with a universal design to cater to a vast diversity of sheep. At present two types of clip have to be used on each sheep, and the cost of the clips is also an issue. As for the pain factor, Dorrian says: "We are very comfortable with what we are seeing ... as are the animal welfare groups ."

The likes of Animal Liberation, however, believe the clips still inflict too much pain. Unless farmers go through the expensive and time-consuming task of bringing their sheep back into the yards to remove each clip by hand, they will simply fall off in the paddock after several weeks. That would see vast areas littered with millions of plastic clips. Work is being done on a biodegradable version.

With blowfly research, the emphasis is on genetic and biological controls rather than traditional chemical solutions. The genetic research is concentrating on genes that allow blowfly maggots to live in the flesh of sheep. Biological tools include a microscopic worm and fungus that kill blowflies.

With the sheep genetics, there are five-year studies going on involving a flock at Armidale (being studied by the CSIRO) and one in Western Australia. Scientists are testing whether sheep can be bred for blowfly strike resistance by having a naturally bare breech, and what trade-offs there might be such as fleece weight. It is a spin-off from a University of Adelaide study of Cojak that found bareness could be inherited. The first lambs from the flocks were dropped last spring.

At the wool industry's Falkiner Research Station in the Riverina, researchers are also part of the biggest sheep gene mapping project in the world.

Cojak was one of 20 rams that have been used to create a flock being measured for more than 100 traits including bare breeches. The hope is that genes can be linked to traits such as blowfly resistance, and farmers can select their flock using genetic information.

Chick Olsson, a Goulburn woolgrower, is one prominent voice predicting farmers will still be mulesing in 2010. He says there are major technological, cost, safety, pain and environmental problems with clips and injections, while blowfly and sheep research offer solutions only over the long term.



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He argues that the wool industry should abandon the 2010 deadline and continue mulesing using pain relief until viable alternatives are developed. That, he argues, would satisfy farmers and the animal welfare lobby.

Olsson has helped a Sydney pediatrician, Meredith Shiel, come up with a pain-killing post-mulesing spray. In 2005 the product, named Tri-Solfen, was given a "minor use permit" by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority, which means it must be bought through a veterinarian.

The Australian Wool Growers Association - a critic of Innovation's performance - says that until alternatives are available, mulesing of lambs is as necessary as emergency surgery to a child, the difference being the child's surgery is carried out with anaesthetic.

Last year nearly 600 woolgrowers used Tri-Solfen on more than a million mulesed lambs, with positive results.

The association's chairman, Martin Oppenheimer, believes Innovation has turned its back on Tri-Solfen because it did not invent it. "The key point in the whole mulesing debate has been the welfare of the sheep," he said.

"The immediate solution to the mulesing debate is in front of AWI's eyes now with the commercially available pain management for mulesing. Longer-term solutions, including genetic selection and novel technologies, will happen with time and the current levels of expenditure."

The pledge signed by the wool industry in 2004 says that until mulesing alternatives are available, the industry will "adopt the use of painkilling products when such products are proven to be efficacious ... and commercially available".

Innovation's media manager, Sally Davison, said: "AWI supports the use of pain relief, but woolgrowers should not be compelled to use a product that isn't registered. AWI is concentrating on developing alternatives to mulesing."

In an address to NSW farm leaders last week, Olsson warned that the animal welfare lobby was winning the hearts and minds of city people and said farmers administering anaesthetic was "the most sensible and cost-effective

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