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Pain Relief

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ANNE KRUGER, PRESENTER: This year about 5 per cent of Merino sheep across southern Australia have died from blow fly strike. It's a shocking and agonising death, and for most growers the controversial practice of mulesing is the most effective way of saving their sheep.

Sean Murphy reports on trials of new pain relief medication which some of the industry's staunchest critics argue is an important interim measure until viable mulesing alternatives are found - and we should warn that viewers may find some of the images in this story confronting.

ON SCREEN: Pain relief

SEAN MURPHY, REPORTER: At Royal Oak near Goulburn in New South Wales it's lamb marking time. But these super fine wool Petali Merinos are being injected with a light sedative before they undergo the sorts of on-farm surgical operations that are common place across the industry.

A University of Sydney research team is monitoring the effectiveness of using the sedative analgesic Xylazine as a preoperative pain relief measure.

SABRINA LOMAX, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY: Preliminary results from small trials that we've done so far have shown us that we do get a highly significant difference between lambs that have been treated with Xylazine and lambs that haven't in terms of their pain responses at the time of mulesing.

And from today's trial I think we'll probably see a similar level of significant difference there as well.

(to team) Three.

TEAM MEMBER: Three.

SEAN MURPHY: Mulesing is a confronting but necessary procedure. It's the surgical removal of skin folds which catch dung and urine and attract blow flies. This year's wet summer saw more than 5 per cent of ewes and wethers across southern Australia die from fly strike.

It's an agonising death but the pain of prevention has damaged the Australian wool industry's international standing.

Faced with retail boycotts, the industry's marketing and research company, Australian Wool Innovation has promised to encourage growers to use pain relief until alternatives to mulesing are found.

Xylazine is already an approved veterinary product. Its application in small doses is being developed by Animal Ethics, the same company which introduced the post-operative spray treatment trisulphin.

(Lamb hung upside down with bloody patch of skin under tail)



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CHICK OLSSON, ANIMAL ETHICS: It's been elusive find something we could use that was so easy and so practical, so this for us is probably closing a loop seven years ago of a full pre and post operation that I think is the ultimate alternative for mulesing and other operations.

SABRINA LOMAX: This method we found works much better.

SEAN MURPHY: Former AWI director Chick Olsson is a major shareholder in Animal Ethics. He said trisulphin will be used on more than five million lambs this year and he hopes the new preoperative treatment has the same take up.

But he says it's not just farmers that need convincing. At this trial, the RSPCA and animal liberation were interested observers.

CHICK OLSSON: You have to bring these people in. You have to be inclusive. You have to be transparent. We came in to an industry where these people were being sued by the former regime and our view point is, let's bring them in together. Let's make them part of the team and if they truly believe in welfare they'll work with us on it.

So it's critical that they're here.

SEAN MURPHY: Animal Ethics technical director Dr Meredith Shiel is also an AWI director. She's a paediatrician and fine wool grower who's been working on pain relief for animals since 2004.

She says the new treatment is complimentary to trisulphin and should be available for about 30 cents a sheep.

DR MEREDITH SHIEL, ANIMAL ETHICS: I think it's important for us to do a wide range of field trials and that's what today is about. We want to look at the dose and the applicator, make sure we can get a product that farmers can use that's safe, that's effective in a whole range of environments - whether you're in the middle of outback or whether you're in the top of mountains in the middle of winter.

So for us it's a matter of doing more of these field trials over the coming year, but if the results are great, you know, we're hopeful that we could have a product very quickly.

(Discusses application methods with farmer)

SEAN MURPHY: Animal ethics got a near \$500,000 Commonwealth Government grant to help develop its new application.

Dr Shiel says she can manage any perceived conflict of interest between her role with Animal Ethics and as director of AWI.

MEREDITH SHIEL: My interest is clearly declared and I would withdraw from being involved with discussions or voting, for example, on any of those sorts of issues and that's the way that I have handled it ever since I've been on the board.

So wherever the company itself may be investing in research into pain relief or procedures to reduce the need for mulesing, even, you know, my interest in trisulphin is fully open and declared and I'm always willing to withdraw from those sort of conversations and decisions.

SEAN MURPHY: Another interested observer at the Royal Oak trial was Laurence Modiano. His family company is the largest wool processor in the world and he's also a former AWI director.



How significant is the mulesing issue still in Europe?

LAURENCE MODIANO, G MODIANO LTD: On a day to day basis, I have to be honest, we don't get that much inquiry for non-mulesed wool. Nevertheless, the threat is always there and I believe that it's very important for us as an industry to be seen to be doing the right thing with regard to the welfare of the animal.

SEAN MURPHY: Lawrence Modiano says wool is booming in Europe and even with a correction, as much as 30 per cent on current prices, the future of the industry looks solid.

LAURENCE MODIANO: There has been a significant shift back towards European wool processing. Machinery capacity is almost fully utilised. My customers are very, very busy, there's very little stock of wool, wool tops, wool yarn in European warehouses.

I'm told that because of the huge increase in costs of labour and power and land in China that certain articles are now as cheap if not cheaper to produce in Europe.

And obviously the high price of wool means that the higher cost of processing in Europe is mitigated. Also the fact that China itself has grown so significantly in economic terms in the last few years means that they're consuming more of their own output, which takes the pressure off their need to export, which means the European retail chain is now once again depending more and more on the European supply chain for its needs.

SEAN MURPHY: Your brief time as a director with Australian Wool Innovation could probably fairly be described as volatile, and you resigned over differences of opinion on how wool should be marketed. Do you still have those strong reservations about the direction of the industry's marketing?

LAURENCE MODIANO: Look, I came to Australia this time in order to witness the progress which is being made on mulesing and animal welfare. I will have things to say about my time at AWI and how I see the future for AWI in due course but I'd rather not bring that issue on board right now.

SEAN MURPHY: He say the industry can't ignore the threat that mulesing or any surgical procedures pose to its reputation for producing a sustainable natural product.

On that score - in Australia at least - the animal protection lobby is supportive of the work being done on pain relief.

MARK PEARSON, ANIMAL LIBERATION: We have certainly come a long, long way, you know, from the time when this whole issue became a crisis and attracted international attention and the whole issue of welfare of lambs being mulesed was probably not being looked at as directly and as honestly as it should have been.

MELINA TENSEN, RSPCA: The fact that pain relief has been used on those lambs that are being mulesed, that of course is a positive as well. But from an animal welfare perspective, I think we'd like to see mulesing ended over the medium to longer term.

VET: We're coming in there, there, there, there, there and there...

SEAN MURPHY: One of the most promising alternatives to mulesing is skin traction, a non surgical, intradermal injection that constricts blood flow and makes the offending skin folds fall off. But the developers of skin traction are still seeking regulatory approval.



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CSIRO SCIENTIST 1: Three.

CSIRO SCIENTIST 2: Three, so that is the birth code.

CSIRO SCIENTIST 1: Yep. Two...

SEAN MURPHY: The CSIRO has been working on selectively breeding for fly strike resistance and Animal Liberation says farmers must be working towards this in the next couple of years.

MARK PEARSON: It's clear from the research that's coming through from the CSIRO and Australian Wool Innovation is that within about two years a grower, if they assertively genetically select to breed out the wrinkles they can select for animals to be as resistant to fly strike as if they had been mulesed.

So if that's the case, then I say that we are going to hopefully see the end of mulesing in two years time.

SEAN MURPHY: Even if that happens, though, treatments such as Xylazine may still have an international market for pain relief in a range of on-farm procedures.

MEREDITH SHIEL: Because it's a general systemic effect that really affects the entire body we think that it may be very useful for any sort of marking procedure in any farm animal.

So we're talking about castration, tail docking, possibly even de-horning - not just in sheep, but in cattle and pigs. The issue of procedures in farm animals is not confined to sheep. It's a growing issue of concern globally across all livestock industries.

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