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## Mulesing pain relief now well in place – so now for the next steps in pain management for sheep



Sparked by the public outcry over animal welfare considerations, the adoption of pain relief for sheep undergoing mulesing has been high amongst producers and geographical spread. But does it go far enough or does the sheep industry, and other livestock industries for that matter, need to look further at pain management in animals?

### At a glance

- ▶▶ Use of Tri-Solfen for pain relief during mulesing has been widely adopted in Australia
- ▶▶ Broader use of pain relief in the sheep and other livestock industries could improve animal welfare
- ▶▶ Current registration of Tri-Solfen sold over-the-counter in Australia is for mulesing only

**E**meritus Professor Peter Windsor, University of Sydney, spoke on progress in pain management in sheep and other livestock at the PanPacific Veterinary Conference in Brisbane in May. Windsor and his team have extensively researched the efficacy of pain relieving drugs in livestock and willingly challenges a few myths about the way animals feel pain.

“The availability of Tri-Solfen has been a ‘game changer’ for the sheep industry,” Windsor said.

“It empowers sheep graziers to take ownership of the welfare of their sheep when they are setting them up for a life-time that is largely free of one of our most serious of pests, *Lucilia cuprina*, the sheep blowfly. The provision of pain relief by farmers for mulesing is an Australian innovation that deserves worldwide recognition.”

While there are other pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory drugs that have a potential role to play in the livestock industries in the future, current interest remains with initially blocking the pain pathways by topical anaesthesia, as occurs in Tri-Solfen.

“Since Tri-Solfen was released onto the market, over 40 million lambs have been treated with it for mulesing. It has been very successfully adopted, with farmers using it because it is a better welfare outcome for their sheep.



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“There are still consultants out there who seem to think it’s a waste of money, but I would argue the point. Take a wool sheep, for example, that might produce a fleece each year for five or six or more years. The cost of using Tri-Solfen on that lamb at mulesing is about 60c.

“It’s a one-off cost and over the sheep’s productive life, that works out at about ten cents a year. It really is a minor cost in the productive life of the sheep but an important investment as it enables mulesing to be done in an a welfare sensitive manner.”

## Going beyond mulesing

Producers clearly agree, given the adoption of Tri-Solfen. Windsor believes that Tri-Solfen may have broader application to pain management in sheep in the future, but at this stage in Australia it is only registered for use at mulesing.

The fact remains that it is an easily administered and very effective topical wound treatment providing wound anaesthesia and improved healing. Windsor and colleagues have conducted approved trials investigating its efficacy during surgical castration.

“We administered Tri-Solfen topically during castration,” Windsor said. “We make a small incision in the scrotum, then immediately spray on the Tri-Solfen as the testicles were removed. The pain relief is instant.

“We believe this is a better approach than administering the drug via a needle before making the incision, as the injection itself causes as much distress as the cut and the pain relief from the spray is quicker.

“This use of Tri-Solfen is not yet approved by APVMA but Animal Ethics, the manufacturers of it tell me they are working as quickly as they can to get the approvals and label changes.”

Allan Giffard, managing director of Animal Ethics Pty Ltd, the company that developed Tri-Solfen, concurs that they are indeed working to broaden the product’s registration in Australia.

“At present in Australia Tri-Solfen is only registered for use at mulesing,” Giffard said.

“We are working with the authorities to broaden that registration to include other pain relief applications in livestock industries.

“It’s hard to put a time on exactly when that process will be completed, but we hope it will be within 12 months. We are getting tremendous support from the APVMA and the livestock industry.

“We are also in the process of obtaining registrations for Tri-Solfen to be used as an over-the-counter product in New Zealand, North America and Europe.

“At this stage there is no over-the-counter pain relieving drug available to livestock producers in any of those regions. We have now been granted patents in Canada and the US, so that opens the door for us to proceed with registration and market development.

“The patenting of Tri-Solfen is timely in these international farming markets, as animal welfare is now a focus of governments, consumers, producers, processors and retail chains. Increasing numbers of consumers need assurance that their food and fibre is produced humanely and without cruelty,” Giffard said.



Two Merino lambs after mulesing. One lamb is displaying minimal pain (below) due to treatment with Tri-Solfen, compared with an untreated lamb (above), with a hunched posture, displaying pain from the mulesing procedure. Photography Peter Windsor.



## Considering animal welfare

Windsor considers pain management to be the 'low hanging fruit' of animal welfare issues, and is hopeful that the broad adoption of Tri-Solfen at mulesing will expand into broader use of pain relief during other standard procedures, once appropriate research has been completed and label recommendations made.

"It is feasible that we will in the future be able to apply local pain relief like this to a whole range of pain-inducing procedures in livestock, such as ear tagging, castration, tail docking, and also cuts and abrasions at shearing.

"I think it is important that the sheep industry is proactive in seeking to find ways of alleviating pain caused to animals during management procedures. We have an ethical responsibility to do that, and I think increasingly, most producers agree," Windsor said.

"We have to be proactive not reactive on animal welfare issues. We have to learn from the mulesing incident and try and prevent other animal welfare crises.



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“Widespread adoption of pain relief during routine husbandry will demonstrate to both our international customers and the animal activist lobby, that ‘best practice’ animal welfare is becoming a priority on Australian farms.”

There are also indications that animals that feel less pain during early handling are easier to handle later in life, but very little research has been conducted in this area and reports to date are anecdotal.

“There are anecdotal reports that animals show less fear when re-mustered when they have been given pain relief for aversive procedures, but our research focus to date has been on what is happening with animals during and within a few days following the procedure,” Windsor said.

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