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**FARMERS EXPERIENCES OF USING HOMEOPATHIC
TREATMENT ON THEIR SHEEP.**

**The London School of Classical Homoeopathy
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1 INTRODUCTION

Many farmers are looking for alternative treatments for their animals, there are numerous reasons for this. The declining number of large animal veterinary surgeons, rising costs associated with production and declining profits, withdrawal times affecting the slaughter of animals and further reducing profit, consumer pressure for reduced additives in food, and animal welfare to name some of these. The shepherd has traditionally and historically cared for their animals, knowing each one individually, this relationship has, in the past, helped to determine any deviation from normal behaviour and treatments needed to restore the animal back to health. The shepherd often worked in isolation having no contact with other people and therefore made their own decisions about the treatment of their sheep which rarely involved the veterinary surgeon. Today, mainly within organic flocks, the treatment of animals is again towards less conventional medicine and towards preventative methods. There are many homeopathic books specifically written for the treatment of animals but the length of this list is not reflected in the literature available when considering the treatment of sheep. The same problem applies to research. What research has been conducted on animals has generally been received poorly and portrayed homeopathic treatment badly, but there have been some very successful treatments used. Many of the problems that arise when considering homeopathy are concerned with the highly diluted remedies, which practitioners of conventional medicine find hard to comprehend as effective. The possibility of animals suffering because of this has always been a point of high concern, this is one reason why homeopaths are not allowed to treat animals (other than their own) unless they are under the supervision of a veterinary surgeon.

Homeopathy is used in many countries to treat animals, in the UK, Hovi and Roderick (2000a, b) found that homeopathy was the main alternative to antibiotic therapy on organic farms, accounting for approximately 50% of all mastitis treatments, and that it was used more frequently on organic farms than on conventional farms Hetkoe (2004).

Qualitative research produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) this method is widely used for human research and within some medical research, these methods, however, are rarely used within veterinary medicine. There are many valid reasons for doing qualitative research. The qualitative research interview aims to explore and describe a range of attitudes and experiences, rather than to describe a representative sample of opinions or qualify experiences and opinions (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

In this study, qualitative research interviews were conducted by telephone and used to explore why, and how successfully, sheep farmers use homeopathy within their flocks recording their attitudes and experiences and how these may have changed since first using homeopathy.

2 AIMS

The aim of this project is to look at farmers experiences of homeopathy with a view to sharing the results with other farmers. There is a severe shortage of supportive literature available for shepherds, sheep no longer generate the revenue they once commanded, their wool and skin are no longer valued as products in their own rite and the cost of veterinary treatment is far more than the monetary value of the sheep. This may be one of the reasons why farmers are seeking alternative methods of

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treatment. To explore these issues the following options were discussed: Why did they choose to explore this method of treatment rather than continuing to use conventional treatment, what have been their experiences good and bad? How have they chosen to use remedies and why, and, do they feel that they were successful? What help is available? Are the problems that they encounter acute/recurrent?

3 MATERIAL AND METHOD

Information about the flocks included in the study:

The mean average acreage of the five farms was 114.4 acres, of these five farms four were organic as previously stated and one was a conventional commercial flock kept at a local agricultural college. The numbers of sheep kept in each flock varied from 48 to 400 and the breeds consisted of: Suffolk and Texel cross; Dorset Down; Castelmilk Moorit; Wiltshire Horn; Hartline Hoarway (north country mule crossed with charolais).

The farms consisted of a mixture of organic livestock and some arable.

This study was performed from September 2005 to March 2006, 9 sheep flocks were originally identified as potential candidates, the keepers of 5 flocks were eventually contacted by telephone in March 2006 and interviews carried out. The interviews were documented verbatim. Of the sheep flocks identified 4 were organic and 1 was run as a conventional commercial flock, all were recruited through Homeopathy at Wellie Level (HAWL) attendance records, the non organic flock was also recruited through HAWL but by word of mouth.

Background information was located from the internet; NHS journals and clinical databases (Medline; Cinahl; Embase); newspaper and magazine articles.

An initial literature search was completed via the internet and then via a large NHS hospital library. Semi structured qualitative interviews were conducted by telephone. The following format was followed to ensure consistency of information and results, but the participants were encouraged to contribute information gained from their own experiences.

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4 Table 1.

Questions discussed during the interviews:

- What influenced your decision to use homeopathic treatment on your sheep
- Do you have access to a homoeopathic veterinary surgeon.
- Do you experience any recurrent health problems within your flock.
- When you treat your animals do you prescribe acutely or prophylactically.
- Do you feel confident in prescribing remedies.
- When you administer remedies how do you do this, eg spray, tablet, in drinking water etc.
- How do you rate the success of your homoeopathic treatment (scoring 1-10)
- How do you measure your success/failure.
- Have you ever used nosodes to treat your sheep
- Do you use conventional medicine alone/together with homoeopathic treatment.

These interviews were conducted between 11th and 22nd of March 2006 by the author and with the person who had overall management responsibility for the care and welfare of the flock. The interviews were documented verbatim. The text was then analysed information relevant to each question was studied under a heading which summarised the content of this question. On the basis of these headings, general themes were identified.

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5 RESULTS

5.1 Reasons for initiating homeopathic treatment:

- Disappointment with veterinary treatment and the attitude of the veterinary surgeon in question.
- Organic operation and the ethos of animal welfare incorporated in this method.
- As an experiment used in conjunction with study.
- Disappointment with the attitude of allopathic vets was a big issue, if an animal did not respond to allopathic treatment, or, presented a challenge in terms of time and effort then it was found that allopathic vets tended to discount the animal in question. In some cases the fact that homeopathy was then used successfully accounted for an increase in the use of this method of treatment. Organic status was another big issue, the restrictions imposed by this method of farming necessitate the need for an alternative treatment to allopathy when animals are sick. The health and welfare of the animals is of paramount importance in organic farming, attention to conditions, housing, additives in feed, slaughter are all monitored. Although conventional and prophylactic chemical drugs are discouraged in organic farming, where a serious problem exists the animal becomes the priority and all methods available which could alleviate their suffering must be employed. The attraction of organic farming also involved the avoidance of antibiotics, pesticides etc. which may be passed on through the meat of the animals this has been highlighted in conventional farming. One farmer agreed to the use of his flock in an experiment in conjunction with a student project, his response to this was favourable and he recognized positive results although not looking to initiate further homeopathic treatment himself at this point.

5.2 Access to homeopathic veterinary surgeon:

- 3 participants did have access to a homeopathic vet although one of these said that it was difficult and consultations were by 'phone, the other two did not have access to a homeopathic vet.
- The participants in this study are striving to attain the very best health status within their flocks which is why they are so committed to using homeopathy. They have worked in some cases within the guidance of a homeopathic vet, and some have struggled at least initially on their own learning from books, adapting human homeopathy to their animals and through the HAWL course. Even where access to a homeopathic vet is possible the local vet was used for routine problems or diagnostic testing.

5.3 Recurrent health problems:

- All participants had recurrent health problems within their flocks to varying degrees. Foot rot; pasteurella; orf; internal parasites; mastitis; new forest eye were mentioned repeatedly. Some of these problems involved individual animals whereas others involved the whole flock. Some problems are treated on an 'as and when' basis and there have been

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improvements in the incidence of these problems. Some of the problems were imported when buying in new stock and some internal parasite problems are persistent despite the utilisation of remedies, clean grazing, herbs and the inclusion of special plants within the grazing. Mastitis in one flock appears to be predominantly in first time mothers. Some of the problems were unexplained, occurring in one animal and not others.

- Two participants felt that mineral deficiency could be linked to recurrent health problems.

5.4 Acute/prophylactic treatment:

- Four of the participants used a mixture of both acute and prophylactic treatment although the preference was to treat individually and acutely. The fifth participant had only used homeopathy once anyway but did treat his flock prophylactically with conventional allopathic medicine.
- Some interesting remedies were cited here, and an impressive amount of remedies were stocked by these farmers.
- Symphytum for a leg fracture in a lamb; Caulophyllum thalictroides for ring womb; Aconite at birth; Antimon-tart for rattly cough; Hepar sulphuris calcareum for deeply infected foot; Calendula officinalis for injuries/prolapse; Bryonia alba for high temperature; Pyrogenium for joint ill; Ignatia amara weaning; Silicea to treat abscesses, also for scarring of the eye/opacity; Arsenicum album for weakness and scours; Mercurius vivus for green scour; Cina for lambs after they have had diarrhoea.

5.5 Confidence in prescribing:

- Three of the participants said no they were not confident, one said that they felt confident now with some experience and with acute and 'obvious' situations, one had only used homeopathy once and so could not comment.
- There were a variety of reasons given for lack of confidence, one participant felt that their attitude reflected a semi scientific scepticism, but they felt they were moderately confident and certainly more confident than their conventional vet who felt if antibiotics were given the animal would get better so the problem was sorted out however, if the same result was achieved using homeopathy the vet felt the animal would have got better anyway.
- One participant said that no, that they felt less confident because they had learnt more. They felt that being trained in classical homeopathy made treating acute problems more difficult. They also felt that they may know a remedy well in human terms but in animals it was not the same. One big problem they felt was, there was not the luxury of time in treating animals, this increased the pressure so they became more nervous. There was also pressure from the vet to give conventional treatment although they were sure that the right remedy could restore health.

5.6 Methods of administration:

- Water troughs were a popular method although this meant treating all of the animals who shared this water which was not always ideal; as were

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sprays although one participant said they didn't feel these worked very well as they could be very stressful; drops; feed.

- The method of administration was often affected by the time of year, obviously it would not be practical to try to give sheep individual medication which would require handling them when they were out in a field. There are various times when medication can be administered effectively such as, lambing – drops to the nose; liquid - if sheep are penned up for any reason. There are also occasions when lambs have been treated at birth and ideally need to be treated again but when they have been turned out into the field the gathering would be really stressful and possibly even more harmful, this presents a further quandary, is it more effective to repeat the remedy or prevent further stress ; sprays - when sheep are put through a race eg. at shearing. This however does not solve the problem of treating sick sheep at other times of the year. Some breeds of sheep are more difficult to work with particularly the primitive sheep because they are often not so used to human contact, but because of the harsher conditions in which they live naturally they are more resilient and self sufficient.

5.7 Personal feelings regarding success of treatment scoring 1-10:

- Two participants felt that their success rated highly at 8 one participant felt that if they had a very sick animal where they were struggling to find a remedy and the vet was involved too they might feel a failure but were encouraged by the fact that the vet often also had no idea, one felt 6-7 but felt they lacked confidence and persistence especially in chronic problems. Also they were not good at following things up, one felt if accurately used 80% and that it was the prescribing that fails not the treatment, in humans we consider at lots of issues that are not available to us in animal prescribing, the final participant felt success was good but needed a follow up.

5.8 Measurement of success

- General wellbeing and reduced need for intervention; mortality at lambing; survival or death – two participants mentioned this; one participant felt that if an animal gets better then that means success if not then it's a failure. This participant had also used remedies supplied by a large commercial supplier these were combinations of several remedies – polypharmacy, one problem associated with these types of remedies is, the difficulty in knowing which component of the mix has worked; don't measure from a farm point of view.

5.9 Use of nosodes:

- Four participants answered yes to this question, the fifth said no.
- Nosodes have been used for varying recurrent health problems often with great success. These remedies are prepared from diseased or infected discharges. They are potentised and do not contain active organisms, and are therefore quite safe. (Boyd 2002). Nosodes are used in cases where the latent diseases represented by these medicines are present, as shown by the existent symptoms or by the history and previous symptoms of the case (Close 2001).

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- Contagious pustular dermatitis (CPD) or Orf which has increasingly become more prevalent (Shuttleworth 1988) is one complaint which has responded well in some cases to treatment with nosodes according to two participants. One other participant had no success with orf nosode.
- Foot rot is another common complaint which has been used by the participants, success with this has been varied, sometimes the problem improved but was not entirely cleared (1) foot rot not successfully dealt with (1).
- Clostridial disease two participants had experience of this, often there are one or two (1) clostridial nosode very effective no further outbreaks (1)
- Pasteurella one participant had used allopathic vaccination for this and, even though the particular strain was identified and included in the vaccine, it was not successful. Homeopathic treatment over the years has produced some success. One participant identified this problem in sheep bought in and this is an ongoing problem because of this.
- Two participants said that internal parasites were a problem, one had not tried homeopathy for this problem, it did not affect their whole flock. The second participant said that worms was their number one problem despite all reasonable measures being observed; clean pasture, worming ewes post birth, garlic, cider vinegar, the problem still exists and they felt that the one way around this was problem was to buy worm resistant animals.

5.10 Use of conventional medicine or a mixture of this and homeopathy:

- Four participants use both together although they prefer to use homeopathy alone if possible, the fifth always uses conventional medicine alone because they have only used homeopathy once anyway.
- One participant explained that if conventional treatment was required they had usually used homeopathy before this, if the problem was acute needing conventional medicine ie. Antibiotics, homeopathy would be used too. Also by using homeopathy too it felt like they were doing something more.
- One participant said quite often together, if intervention was necessary at lambing antibiotics were given prophylactically, injury to a foot antibiotic spray and Hepar Sulph. Different approach of two people concerned with the care of the animals, one sees an animal suffering and wants to treat straight away conventionally, the other would like to try homeopathy.
- One participant who uses both methods looks at individual circumstances, if it seems sensible to use conventional medicine they tend to stick with this to the end.
- One participant when necessary uses conventional treatment, the welfare of the animal always comes first. When using allopathy they still give homeopathic remedies too, and feel that this is worthwhile because it can give time to find the remedy which will get to the root of the problem, also prevention of suffering is important.
- One participant uses allopathic medicine alone as they have only used homeopathy once.

6 DISCUSSION

Many farmers looking to treat their sheep are keen to find alternatives to conventional drugs which are expensive, time consuming to administer and remain in the food chain in some instances for a long period of time. Looking at some of these farmers experiences of homeopathy, why did they explore this method of treatment? What experiences have they had, good and bad? how do they choose their remedies, and how successful are they? What were the difficulties they encountered, and why?

Of the five participants in this study, four farm organically and one commercially. The concept of naturalness is an important principle in organic livestock systems. There have been studies carried out which resulted in the identification of three clusters of naturalness, essentially focussing on the animal psyche, species-specific social behaviour, or physical health and robustness. (Baars 2004). It is now becoming more recognised that animals have intricate social networks and events that impact upon their lives cause much more suffering than was originally thought, this in turn may well upset the delicate natural balance of their existence. Successful homeopathic treatment means knowing animals' personalities and histories, rather than simply relying on symptoms. (Curtis 2002)

Disillusionment, frustration, and confusion are comments voiced by the participants of this study with regard to conventional veterinary medical officers, and it was, in part, the reason why at least some of them turned to homeopathy. Homeopathic remedies, often in the form of tiny white pills, are extremely diluted animal, plant, or mineral extracts. To many people homeopathy makes no sense, especially when they hear how homeopathic remedies are produced. The extract is combined with water or water and alcohol in a one to ten dilution. It is vigorously shaken and then diluted again in the same proportion. The process is repeated many times. According to homeopathic theory, the curative properties of even highly toxic substances are released at these high dilutions. The more the extract is diluted, the higher its potency (Healthfacts 1991). The lack of access to specifically trained homeopathic vets does make the choice to use homeopathy a little more difficult and increases the pressure associated with choosing a remedy. The HAWL course has, in some part, helped with this situation, and now there are increasing numbers of farmers who feel more equipped to use homeopathy as part of their health plan. The desire to reduce chemical substances in the food they are producing and eating was also a big incentive to farm organically and treat homeopathically for most of the participants. Whilst recognising that profitability and competition are important factors within farming and that they are issues which are increasingly contributing to the difficulties that farmers are facing, homeopathy is a tool available to all farmers, a vital addition to their management strategy, concentrating on good health and not crisis management (Lees 2004). Success for some participants was measured in terms of survival or death, dead sheep equal reduced profitability and, in a sense, failure. There is little scope for dealing with large numbers of deaths in flocks before the venture becomes unviable because the sheep itself is worth such a low monetary figure.

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Recurrent health problems exist within all the flocks included in this study to a greater or lesser degree, they are an area of concern and a cause of disappointment when homeopathy has been tried and failed. Where prophylactic treatment has been used, it is mainly in this area of recurrent health problems, nosodes often being the choice of treatment in these cases. Mineral deficiency was an issue that some participants felt might be contributing to recurrent problems and they were looking to correct these.

7 CONCLUSION

Homeopathy can offer real benefits to farmers, it can be used to treat conditions which conventional medicines can't, such as grief suffered by a ewe when her lamb is taken away (Lees 2002). There is a real need for documentation of treatments and the results of these treatments whether they be success or failure. Further literature is needed to support the farmers who are using homeopathy, a record of treatments, guidance on how to use them and when they may prove beneficial.

The portrayal of homeopathic medicine in the press and in many research articles is not good. According to human research Arnica, used to treat pain and bruising, is not effective (Stevinson, Devaraj, Fountain-Barber, Hawkins, 2003) research into managing helminths in organically farmed ruminants was also disappointing, apparently Cina, a plant (*Artemisia cina*) most used in homeopathic compounds for regulating worm infections, when tested in nematode experimental infections was not effective on egg counts. Similar information was obtained from a trial carried out on a homeopathic complex based on the plants: *Filix mas*; *Allium sativum*; *Kamala*; *Areca catechu*; *Solidago*. (Carbaret, Bouilhol, Mage, 2002). *Podophyllum* used in a randomised double blind trial showed no significant difference in calves treated with this remedy and a placebo. (de Verdier, Ohagen, Alenius, 2003).

(Shuttleworth, 1988) claimed successful treatment of people, sheep, and goats who had contracted Orf, using *Thuja*, and according to C. Day, secretary of the British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons, Homeopathy could help control Foot and Mouth Disease. Apparently Borax in homeopathic use has a broad sphere of action, but it is its specific affinity for the epithelium of the mouth, coupled with its ability to cause vesicular eruption on the feet, that indicates its potential in the use of foot and mouth prevention. Its use has been well documented in various outbreaks and is of great use when used properly according to G. Macleod (MAFF 2001).

Currently it is difficult to assess the efficacy of homeopathy from the present literature, but, farmers feel dissatisfied with the service offered by conventional veterinary surgeons, who often do not have the answer to the health problems they are presented with. There are so many contradictions, however, despite this, there are an increasing number of farmers who are using homeopathy to treat their animals. In the UK both organic and conventional farmers are using homeopathic medicines to treat their livestock (ECCH 2003).

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