



Principles and Guidelines for the Better Choices Audited Welfare Program for Woolgrowers, 2008

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Also available online at www.betterchoices.com.au

1. INTRODUCTION

Better Choices is an audited welfare program that identifies woolgrowers who follow an integrated, planned approach to achieve best-practice welfare for husbandry procedures in sheep.

Better Choices woolgrowers commit to select for sheep that have a natural resistance to flystrike to breed up flock immunity. While selecting for natural immunity, they only perform the mulesing procedure on sheep susceptible to flystrike. They use accredited practitioners, minimal technique and scientifically proven, commercially available pain relief.

Better Choices woolgrowers continue to use integrated pest management to manage sheep to minimise the incidence of flystrike.

2. OUR RESPONSIBILITY

The welfare of sheep is of utmost importance to Australian woolgrowers and the Australian wool industry. It is underpinned by the Australian Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – The Sheep (Appendix 1), which outlines the basic standards of care expected for all Australian sheep, including:

- Adequate experienced supervision;
- Provision of nutrition to sustain good health and vigour;
- Access to sufficient water of suitable quality to meet physiological needs;
- Protection from climatic extremes, natural disasters and predation;
- Protection from pain, injury and disease;
- Social contact with other sheep;
- Handling facilities that do not cause injury and that minimise stress to sheep.

There are specific guidelines for management practices, husbandry procedures and euthanasia, with special appendix requirements for intensive sheep systems, euthanasia and mulesing.

Husbandry procedures, particularly mulesing, tail docking and castration, are invasive and painful. The ultimate solutions are to find alternate management practices or breed sheep such that they no longer require these procedures; however, there is a need to address the welfare of sheep more immediately, while long-term solutions are being investigated and implemented. This can be achieved by using effective pain relief.^{1,2}

Until recently, few if any analgesic agents have been available for use to alleviate pain in sheep. Traditional husbandry procedures have therefore been performed without the use of analgesia. Now however, analgesic agents are becoming available, allowing husbandry procedures to be performed more humanely (in line with equivalent procedures performed in pets, such as castration and spaying), while long-term solutions are pursued and implemented to allow the procedures to be ceased.

The first available analgesic agent is a product that alleviates pain associated with mulesing. It is also an antiseptic agent that stops bleeding and significantly speeds wound contraction and healing.^{1,2}

Better Choices woolgrowers are the first to adopt the use of analgesia for mulesing and will be the first to adopt the use of analgesic agents for other painful procedures when and wherever such products are proven effective and commercially available, as an interim measure while long-term solutions are pursued.

3. MULESING

a. Background

Mulesing is a surgical husbandry procedure that involves cutting away the loose folds of skin on each side of a sheep's breech area and tail. The procedure is performed to reduce the susceptibility of the sheep to flystrike. When the wound heals, a smooth scar forms and there is an increase in the size of the area that is bare of wool around the anus. This greatly reduces faecal and urine staining of the area and the attraction to flies. It thus provides the sheep with lifetime protection against 'flystrike' (see below). Where mulesing is practised, it is recommended to be carried out on lambs between the ages of two weeks and 12 weeks.

b. Flystrike

Merino sheep, particularly those with a high degree of skin wrinkle in the breech, are susceptible to flystrike by the introduced blowfly, *Lucilia cuprina*. The fly lays eggs in the folds of skin on the breech area of sheep. These hatch into larvae that rapidly grow into a thriving mass of maggots that crawl beneath the wool, eating away at the flesh of the sheep. This causes extreme pain and suffering and rapidly leads to death. The incidence varies according to the season; however, in high flystrike seasons, when the weather is both wet and warm, 30 per cent or more sheep can be attacked at one time.

c. Prevention of flystrike

Farmers employ an integrated approach to flystrike management including crutching and shearing, good worm control and strategic use of chemicals, genetic selection and paddock grazing management. In addition, mulesing is carried out in sheep that have a high degree of wrinkle in the breech area. This combination reduces the incidence of breech flystrike to just 1 per cent or less of susceptible sheep.^{3,4,5}

d. Welfare consequences of mulesing sheep

Although mulesing is highly effective to reduce the incidence of flystrike in susceptible sheep, the procedure itself is traditionally performed without anaesthetic, and it causes significant pain and stress responses in lambs. , These take 24–48 hours to resolve, and reductions in weight gain may persist for 14 days as the wound undergoes healing. The use of analgesia significantly alleviates pain and reduces stress responses to mulesing.^{1,2}

Managing susceptible sheep without mulesing requires increased handling for inspections, chemical sprays and crutching to try and manage flystrike risk. Both flystrike and the cumulative stress impact of increased handling have welfare consequences. Crutching, for example, to shear the wool from the wrinkly breech, results in an acute stress response that is similar to mulesing but which resolves after one to two hours , and would be required three to four times per year in unmulesed sheep. The optimum solution is to breed sheep that are genetically resistant to flystrike.

The Australian wool industry is committed to phasing out the procedure of mulesing and has proposed to do so by 31 December 2010 (refer Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Sheep, Appendix 1, page 17). It is investing in research and development to explore and implement genetic breeding programs as well as to develop analgesics, other painless, non-surgical alternatives, and pest management/elimination strategies to remove reliance on the procedure to prevent flystrike in the Australian merino flock.

In the meantime, Better Choice woolgrowers share community concerns over the pain and stress associated with mulesing and have adopted the use of pain relief to address welfare concerns during the phase-out period.

4. BETTER CHOICES VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

1. Better Choices woolgrowers recognise and comply with legislation in Australian states and territories covering animal welfare and regulation of husbandry procedures.
2. Animal welfare is recognised and pursued as an essential component of animal husbandry and productivity.
3. Better Choices woolgrowers carefully consider all options for breech strike prevention in flocks before undertaking mulesing. Specific low-risk woolgrowing regions, improved selection and breeding for fly and worm resistance, together with crutching two to three months before shearing, or other possible strategies, may prove to effectively prevent breech flystrike.
4. Mulesing will be carried out by Better Choices woolgrowers only in circumstances in which it is clearly believed to be in the best interest of the welfare of the sheep.
5. All Better Choices woolgrowers undertake to be accredited or to use contractors that are accredited under the National Mulesing Assurance Program: www.nmap.com.au/.
6. Better Choices woolgrowers must use the analgesic pain relief (Tri-Solfen) during the mulesing procedure and must treat all lambs that are mulesed under their care.
7. Better Choices woolgrowers agree to an auditing system that confirms they have treated all lambs mulesed under their care (see below).
8. Better Choices woolgrowers will adopt promptly any pre-analgesic treatments (such as carprofen) that have proven effective, once they have been approved by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA: www.apvma.gov.au) and are commercially available.
9. Better Choices woolgrowers will adopt promptly, analgesic treatments such as Tri-Solfen for other surgical husbandry procedures including tail docking and castration once they have been approved by the APVMA and are commercially available for these procedures.
10. As part of the Australian wool industry's commitment to phase out mulesing, Better Choices woolgrowers undertake to utilise a natural selection system based on Australian Sheep Breeding Values or other selection methods to select for sheep with low breech wrinkle scores that are less susceptible to flystrike.

5. BETTER CHOICES PROCEDURES AND REGISTRATION PROCESS

1. Better Choices producers have a clear breeding plan for selection of sheep that are naturally resistant to flystrike.
2. Prior to mulesing all lambs should be checked for their suitability to remain unmulesed. Any lambs that have a natural genetic resistance to flystrike and therefore are at low risk to flystrike should remain unmulesed (for a recommended selection process refer Appendix 4, Breech Scores, for low risk flystrike selection).
3. Where a producer wishes to sell wool from sheep that have not been mulesed under the Better Choices brand they will be able to do so provided:
 - They sign the Better Choices declaration, Appendix 3.
 - They agree to make their wool classer's report and wool industry non-mulesed vendor declaration statement available for audit, on request, to Better Choices.
 - They agree to an auditing process to confirm that sheep are unmulesed and do not suffer a greater incidence of flystrike than analgesia treated, mulesed counterparts (approximately 1 per cent). This will require agreeing to random spot inspections by a qualified Better Choices representative at the time of shearing and/or during seasonal times of high flystrike risk for the region. (The program specifies that 2 per cent of such producers will be audited annually.)
 - Lambs that are 'unmulesed' often still undergo the part of the procedure referred to as 'tail stripping', which involves removing a small flap of skin over the surface of the docked tail. Wherever this is performed, producers must use Tri-Solfen analgesic agent and agree to the auditing process as outlined below, to confirm that Tri-Solfen has been used on all lambs undergoing this procedure, to qualify as Better Choices producers.
4. Lambs that are at high risk of flystrike and that require mulesing for welfare reasons should be mulesed by an accredited practitioner, using minimal technique and according to National Mulesing Assurance guidelines.
5. All lambs mulesed must be treated with the analgesic product Tri-Solfen, according to label recommendations, in sufficient quantity to fully coat the wound and skin edges.
6. The analgesic product Tri-Solfen must be purchased from a veterinarian and be accompanied as per legal requirements with a prescription from the veterinarian detailing number of lambs to be treated and amount of doses supplied by the veterinarian.
7. In order to acquire the product on behalf of a woolgrower, veterinarians must complete 'Attachment B', available from the product wholesaler. This document is returned to the wholesaler to allow supply of the product, see Appendix 2. The wholesaler will confirm supply of the Tri-Solfen to the veterinarian and forward the document to Better Choices.
8. Woolgrowers must then register with Better Choices by email, fax or telephone.
9. Once woolgrowers are registered they are sent a Better Choices declaration form, see Appendix 3, along with the Principles and Guidelines policy. Signing the declaration confirms their commitment to the Better Choices Principles and Guidelines, and their agreement to an auditing process that certifies that all lambs mulesed in their care were treated with the analgesic agent.

This auditing process involves the following:

- Annual confirmation that Tri-Solfen has been purchased in an amount that is appropriate for the number of lambs to be treated. This will entail a copy of the 'Attachment B' form being sent from the veterinarian to the wholesaler, and then from the wholesaler to the Better Choices auditing centre. This document outlines the estimated number of lambs to be mulesed and total amount purchased.
 - Signing of a declaration by the producer. This declaration is sent to the Better Choices auditing centre, and states the time of treatment, the details of the supplying veterinarian and the details of the clip to be marketed under the Better Choices brand.
 - Once a producer has registered with Better Choices and submitted a signed declaration form, the producer will be provided with a registration certificate for the current year. This certificate should be provided to the grower's wool broker at the time of auction for wool to be marketed under the Better Choices brand. The Australian Wool Exchange (AWEX: www.awex.com.au) will also be notified that the bales have been subject to an audit and are approved for listing in the AWEX catalogue.
 - Producers must make their wool classer's report available upon request, to be cross-referenced against the script and feedback report from the veterinarian. This will confirm that the number of lambs treated and the number shorn by the Better Choices producer are compatible. It will also be cross-referenced against the producer's Better Choices declaration. These details may be subject to audit at any time by the Better Choices auditing centre.
 - Where a producer seeks to sell 'unmulesed wool' under the Better Choices brand, their wool classer's report must also detail the number of unmulesed sheep of each type (lambs, hoggets, ewes and wethers) and the identification labels on the bales containing the wool from these sheep. Again, the wool classer's report must be available to audit at any time by the Better Choices auditing centre.
10. Better Choices woolgrowers also undertake that when indicating Better Choices wool in the National Wool Declaration they will do so in alignment with the guidelines set out in Appendix 6.
11. Registration will be renewed via the process described on an annual basis.

6. APPENDIXES

To see appendixes in full, please visit www.betterchoices.com.au and click on Guidelines.

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