



The GEORGE Farm Vets

Sheep Signals – what are they trying to tell you?

September 2019

Sheep will try the patience of even the most experienced shepherd. They escape, they get stuck in ridiculous places and have a propensity for sudden death. All of this means they take some looking after!

In order to have a good quality of life, sheep require;

- Freely available, fresh, appropriate food
- Clean water
- Enough space to lie comfortably
- The opportunity to express normal behaviour
- Freedom from sickness and disease

Sheep need to be checked regularly so problems are identified quickly, once a day as a minimum.

The idea behind 'Sheep Signals' is to use everyday observations to your advantage in order to spot problems early.

When you observe a group of animals, try to do so with an open mind. Looking is not the same as watching. Make observations when checking a group of sheep, then come up with a reason for that observation.



Sheep can make it difficult to spot problems; ill sheep will hide in the middle of the flock and fleece can hide weight loss. Generally, sheep lying down and ruminating or 'cudding' are healthy.

Moving sheep will often uncover any problem animals - those lame or sick will be at the back.

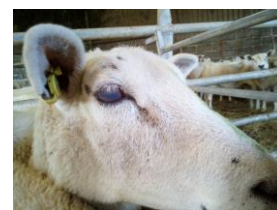
Example 1- Observing sheep in the field, some of the sheep are lying down and some are grazing. The younger animals are sleeping while the ewes are alert. Why? Normal behaviour – the ewes keep watch.

Example 2- You observe a group of animals with one sheep on her own twitching her tail with a damp patch at her back end. Why? Something is making her uncomfortable and she needs examining; it could be flystrike.

Some things to watch out for at the moment; **flystrike**, **haemonchus contortus**- 'barbers pole'- worm-causing anaemia and bottle jaw, changes in body condition score/dung consistency indicating increased **worm burden**. If you have any concerns about worms drop a faeces sample into us at the practice and we can check it for you.



Our dispensary team of Bridget, Andy and Kirsty can help sort out your fly treatment regime; and give you the best price through our shop. Ensuring good fly control is essential not only to avoid flystrike but also to reduce the incidence of mastitis and 'pink eye'.



Get into the habit of recording any behaviour you witness, in a notepad or on your phone.

The NADIS app is an extremely useful resource for farmers with disease symptoms and photographs for reference.

Animal Handling

Sheep are herd animals and feel safe in a group. Recent research has shown that sheep can remember up to 50 faces. They like familiar faces- both human and ovine; when shown pictures of familiar sheep the

animals in the study showed less signs of stress than if shown pictures of goats.



Cambridge University Scientists conducted a study which presented sheep with two doors they could push open to gain food. On one was a picture of a smiling human or a happy sheep, on the other an angry human or a stressed-out sheep. The sheep vastly preferred the door showing a smiling face rather than an angry one.

As prey animals they are very susceptible to stress. Sheep want to feel safe and protected, they like routine. Handling them gently and carefully is important, not only in terms of animal welfare, but also in reducing the risk of stress induced issues such as abortion, hypocalcaemia and pneumonia.



Shouting, waving sticks or being pushed too hard by a quad or dog are classic ways to cause stress to sheep. Moving animals is often a taxing activity for stockmen, but if you are calm, they will be calm.

Poor handling can also affect carcass quality which reduces profit. Bruised carcasses can be visually unappealing, which deters buyers, particularly in lambs. They may require trimming, which reduces carcass weight and may exclude them from certain high-value markets.

Wool-pull in sheep can cause severe bruising, particularly in spring lambs, which damage very easily. Take care in loading, transit and unloading, ensuring appropriate stocking densities are followed.



Recognising the emotions of animals is now widely recognised as a key part of ensuring good animal welfare.

Compared to other animals, sheep have few facial expressions due to lack of facial muscles. However, they have several muscles involved in moving their ears. Scientists have attempted to observe different ear positions on sheep and attribute them to particular emotions. The findings correlated with anecdotal evidence from farmers on how they would interpret a sheep's demeanour- i.e. it matches up with what stockmen already knew.

- One ear forward one back tends to indicate surprise.
- Both ears back indicate fear or apprehension due to an uncontrolled situation.
- Ears down can indicate sickness.
- Horizontal position is neutral

I hope you are all having a good summer, weather notwithstanding. We will see you in the autumn for pre breeding checks and blood sampling!



All the best, B.

Zolvix is now available from wholesalers as well as vets. We are aware that it is being used inappropriately sometimes, which is a worry as it is the only class available without widespread resistance. Please discuss responsible use with your vet, even if you choose to buy through a retail source.