

Letter to the Editor

SIR,—I read with interest Dr Ryder's letter on sheep treatment in Volume IX of the REVIEW. I can assure him that the practice he describes is far from extinct, and can possibly add a little to his observations.

This operation is in use by the great majority of the farmers who run fell flocks in the dales of Durham. I would estimate that 65 per cent of flocks are so treated regularly while those who use it occasionally must bring the numbers to over 75 per cent. It is used in the treatment of 'Double Scaup'. The hogs (lambs) are 'scauped', 'cracked', or 'knocked' as Dr Ryder indicates, on the frontal bone. Some farmers use a rounded pebble, some the butt of a penknife, but most use their knuckles. The bone cracks audibly if at all. In practice every sheep knocked by an experienced shepherd 'cracks'; this is a matter of 'eye'. An almost uncanny knack of predicting can be learned and although they are usually 'knocked' at dipping or some such time of gathering, it is very common to catch odd hogs that are not doing well and 'knock' them on the spot. I have seen this done and have noted the progress of the lamb in the next few weeks without change of pasture or any dosing.

I have heard members of the veterinary profession condemn the practice and deny that 'Double Scaup' was a disease in itself. It is often held that the thinness of the outer plate of the frontal bone is possibly symptomatic of other conditions which are causing unthriftiness, e.g. worm infestation. Many flockmasters hold a contrary view and regard the condition as a disease in its own right. I must admit that my own observation of the accuracy with which they can diagnose, or

possibly I should say predict, the condition, and the universal account of the benefits, incline me to think that there is at least a case for investigation.

I am dubious about the association with Sheep Nostril Fly (*Oestrus ovis*) attack. Not one of my informants has mentioned this pest in this connection; nor have I any indication that it has even been prevalent in this area. The increased secretion of hormones is an interesting suggestion. I have had several attempted explanations. Many say that it is done to break an air bubble which forms and stunts growth. More compare it to 'cutting' a cow for felon (this is the practice of making an incision, usually in the brisket, and inserting a leaf, either fresh or dried, of 'felon grass' (*Helleborus viridis*), securing with a stitch, and later removing the leaf and the consequent pus), thus supporting to some degree a theory of increased secretion of hormones or white blood corpuscles. By far the most of those who use the practice advance no explanation except that it is a matter of common knowledge and that it works.

It may be of interest to note that while it is almost invariably the hogs that are 'cracked', some shepherds will say that odd shearlings may need a 'crack', though this seems a rather controversial view.

I can add nothing to the tale of the distribution of the practice. As far as I know it is in current use throughout the northern Pennines.

Yours faithfully,

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