The mating game

This series gives readers the opportunity to consider and contribute to discussion of some of the ethical dilemmas that can arise in veterinary practice. Each month, a case scenario is presented, followed by discussion of some of the issues involved.

In addition, a possible way forward is suggested; however, there is rarely a cut-and-dried answer in such cases, and readers may wish to suggest an alternative approach. This month's dilemma, 'The mating game', was submitted by Richard Brown and is discussed by Gwen Rees. Readers with comments to contribute are invited to send them as soon as possible, so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue. Discussion of the dilemma 'Always tell the truth?', which was published in the March issue of In Practice, appears on page 207.

The series is being coordinated by Siobhan Mullan, of the University of Bristol. It is hoped it will provide a framework that will help practices find solutions when facing similar dilemmas.

The mating game

Gwen Rees qualified from the University of Liverpool in 2009 and worked in a mixed, rural practice in Wales, before spending a year as a dairy veterinarian in New Zealand. She is currently a teaching fellow in farm animal population medicine at the University of Bristol.

You are called to attend to a very valuable Suffolk tup, jointly owned by your client and two other farmers. They agreed to synchronise their pedigree flocks a fortnight apart so that the tup can move every two weeks to a new farm. The flocks all have the same health status.

The tup has just spent four weeks serving the two other flocks but now looks a bit off colour. For your client it is vital that he is quickly restored in order to serve the synchronised ewes. You note that the tup has a temperature of 106°F, a slightly increased breathing rate, a small amount of clear discharge from one nostril, slightly inflamed ocular mucus membranes, enlarged prescapular lymph nodes and normal ruminal sounds. His demeanour is normal but he does seem to be lacking a bit of energy for a large tup. Your provisional diagnosis is that he is starting to suffer from an acute bronchopneumonia and fever, for which stress is a precipitating cause. You advise the client that the best course for the tup would be rest, antibiotic therapy, anti-inflammatories, as well as good quality hay and easy access to water. The farmer hopes that none of the therapy will affect the viability of the tup's sperm but will follow your advice apart from the matter of rest.

Issues to consider

It is a difficult situation for the farmer to be in. He has invested a lot of money in this ram, has synchronised his flock specifically for a planned start of mating, which you are now advising him against, and is unlikely to have any contingency plan in place. If the ewes were synchronised with sponges, and those sponges have already been removed as is likely at this point, then they are going to come into heat in the next couple of days whatever happens. If his ewes do not have a ram, the entire mating season is put back by one cycle and, seeing as he is towards the tail end of the mating season, the lowered fertility, coupled with a completely different lambing time next spring, will have a detrimental effect on the farm's productivity and profitability for the next year at least. The human welfare implications of a sudden unforeseen loss of productivity on a family farm are numerous and must be taken into account.

On the other hand, this is a very sick ram. Forcing him to work despite pneumonia and a high fever may not only be unfair from a welfare point of view, but may have serious consequences, including death. As any farm vet knows, sheep are very fond of dying at the slightest provocation and certainly pneumonia in a ram about to be put into a field full of ewes in oestrus is potentially a deadly situation. At the very least, there is a reasonable chance the ram has either lowered fertility or temporary sterility with a fever this high, and it would take about seven weeks after recovery for new sperm to be produced. So not only could you end up with a dead ram but also with a field full of empty ewes at the end of the season.

The fact that this ram was bought in syndicate complicates matters and there may be an element of blame and resentment at play, particularly if there are no contracts or financial agreements in place covering situations like this. This farmer is likely to feel very hard done by, especially if the two other farms get a nice crop of pedigree lambs and he is left with a field full of empty ewes and no income for the year.

Possible way forward

The ideal rest time of one to two weeks would mean introduction very late in the season and, depending on the circumstances, might not be an option for these ewes. It’s possible that negotiating a couple of rest days before introduction could mean that at least some of the ewes are still caught during their first cycle and the rest can be caught on
The second. Yet everything still depends on the ram having viable sperm and being well enough to work. A sperm analysis could be offered to ascertain whether there is any point in even trying to use the ram this season, although some healthy sperm may still be stored in the epididymis initially.

Ultimately, I believe, the best solution for the ram, the ewes and the farm is to find another ram for this season. At such short notice this would not be easy, and either a substandard ram or a very high price will make this option unattractive to the farmer. But it is possible, since the ram was bought with the two other farmers, who have used him without problem, that they would be willing to help source a replacement as a gesture of goodwill.

It is also worth advising the owners that if the ram is insured the company will not pay out in the event of death or infertility when it finds that he was used despite a diagnosis of pneumonia and veterinary advice to be rested. It might also be necessary to gently remind the farmer of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and of the ‘five freedoms’, one of which is ‘freedom from pain, injury and disease’. If going against veterinary advice resulted in the death of this ram you, as their vet, would be within your rights to report the farmer, who would stand a significant risk of prosecution and a hefty fine for neglect.

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Any thoughts?

Readers with views to contribute on ‘The mating game’ should e-mail them to inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue. The deadline for receipt of comments is Friday, April 24. Please limit contributions to 200 words.