

READER'S VIEW - A LUMP TOO FAR JACK SMELLIE HAS A SCARE WITH HER FLOCK



We have just had a CLA scare! If like us you thought 'Country Landowners Association???' you might want to read on. CLA also stands for Caseous Lymphadenitis which is a highly contagious bacterial disease affecting sheep and goats (and if you believe some sources, alpacas as well).

The story began when one of our pygmy nannies (Onion) became bloated: quite what she had eaten we were unsure of but in attempting to get liquid paraffin into her, we discovered rather a large lump in her neck. It was just below her chin and felt hard and attached! It was of course a Sunday evening!! We debated whether we should leave the vet until the morning but because of the bloat AND the lump we decided not. The vet was definitely more worried about the lump than the bloat (which has already begun to subside by the time she arrived), so much so that having taken one sample of the lump contents, she then sent a colleague to take another the following day along with a syringe of blood. It was at this point we were advised they suspected CLA and that we needed to immediately isolate Onion in a separate paddock/housing (along with her two eight week old kids) and remove and destroy the bedding where she had been.

What is CLA?

CLA causes abscesses to form in the lymph nodes, usually in the head and neck but also internally. It is spread via the resulting pus, there are NO licensed vaccines in the UK, NO cure and once an

animal has it is will always have it and 'may' die from it plus any meat carcasses containing CLA will be condemned. Culling is therefore strongly recommended (gulp!). It is actually quite rare in the UK but causes significant economic issues in large flocks and herds in North America where its spread is compounded by shearing, both because the animals are penned up so closely and through the use of the shearing equipment itself.

Quite why one pygmy goat living on a 'small' smallholding in Cornwall should have contracted the disease seemed a massive mystery. The last movements on or off were last autumn and injuries (leaving exposed skin) are thankfully rare plus our bio-security measures are pretty rigorous.

We were told that the blood test would be done that Thursday and we would have the results by Friday but that a false negative was possible and to be sure, we would need to wait another week after that for the results of the culture test.

We have the mobile number of one of our vets: our guilt at using it rather than the main vet line disappeared when by the end of the following Monday we still had no news!! Onion meanwhile was fine, well actually she was deeply upset at being separated from the rest of the herd and cried often and loudly, but physically she was fine. Her lump was no bigger, no smaller and it was not oozing in any way at all.

The long wait continues

We had a phone call on Tuesday: it was good news! The culture test (NOT the blood test) was

negative BUT we were now told it was the blood test that was actually the more crucial and we had ANOTHER 7-10 days to wait!!! In the meantime, we agreed to see if we could drain the actual lump which we all knew was full of pus so whatever was the cause, removing it seemed a good idea! The draining (on the Wednesday) went well, the resulting edema (excess fluid under the skin) in Onion's neck and face was not so good. She stopped eating and became very lethargic and then we wondered if we should have just left well alone... it seemed as though we were going from bad to worse!

It was now Thursday, ten days into the drama and the vet (a third one) who came to deal with the edema told us we could expect the blood result tests THAT afternoon or Friday morning!!! (Not quite sure what happened to the 7-10 day wait...) Relief at thinking it might all be over before the weekend was combined with massive panic. In our heads we had visions of all our sheep and goats needing to be culled, the whole of our Relaxed Farming project (see box) having to be abandoned and a swift move back to suburbia following!

CONSTANTLY aware of the health and well-being of our animals...

Thursday afternoon came and went, Thursday evening came and went, Friday morning came and went, Friday lunchtime came and... we had a phone call! It was another negative!!!! BUT our vet said, no CLA test is 100% certain and we needed to remain very aware!!! We put down the phone and decided we were totally back to normal and we should no more worry about CLA than other any potential disease. OR, put it another way, we are CONSTANTLY aware of the health and well-being of our animals and would remain our normal vigilant selves but basically get back to enjoying the smallholding and all the wonderful livestock within it!! We are sure if she could speak Onion would have agreed with us!!!

Any lessons learnt or guidance to pass on?

Not really! Could we/SHOULD we have done anything differently? Not sure. It was actually all very stressful, we lost a little bit of faith in our vets and Onion is still not quite back to full health as her edema is not yet resolved. We could have ignored the vets' advice and kept Onion with the herd. We could have left the lump alone and seen if antibiotics might reduce it (we had given her a short course with 'some' effect). The final test results would however have been unaltered. We are now wiser, probably more paranoid and definitely more cynical about how animal diseases are managed. And the old adage: 'the more you learn, the more you realise there IS to learn' is ever more relevant!!! We think it must have first been said with smallholding/farming in mind!!!

Relaxed Farming
With their teaching experience, Jack and David are currently developing an 'online farm'. This is based on a daily diary about their smallholding and will be accompanied by videos, teaching resources and ideas for use in the classroom or at home.

The main aim: to encourage young people (and their teachers/families/wider community) to find out where their food comes from and to understand how essential it is to look after the animals and land producing that food.

Relaxed Farming is due to launch in September 2014 by which time it will contain a full year's diary detailing all the smallholding's ups and downs, births and deaths, successes and failures. Progress so far can be viewed at: www.relaxedfarming.co.uk/.

For more on this story and others, see www.relaxedfarming.co.uk

References: www.merckmanuals.com/, www.nadls.org.uk/ and www.defra.gov.uk/ahvla-en/files/pub-sheep-cla.pdf