

## Minimal intervention and 'clean knees' secret to minimal antibiotic use on Devon sheep farm

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Peter Baber farms at Weir Park Farm, near Christow in Devon, running 1100 ewes and ewe lambs comprising a combination of Exlana, Suffolk, Texel and SufTex breeds

Although he has never used antibiotics routinely, he says he is using less and less because of refining his management strategy to prevent disease.

Mr Baber uses a whole-flock management approach which involves constant revision and improvement of all aspects from genetics to nutrition and simple husbandry measures.

Exlanas make up two thirds of the flock and are lambed outdoors. The remaining Suffolk and Texel ewes are housed at lambing.

"We are looking for minimal or zero assistance at birth. That goes for both outdoor and indoor flocks.

"Anything that has difficulties at lambing is likely to be culled. This approach has cut assistance down to virtually zero in the Exlanas and to less than 10% in the indoor lambers," Mr Baber says.

"If we intervened in the past we used to give antibiotics as a precaution against infection."

So, improving the ease of lambing trait has improved flock health and reduced antibiotic use, he says.

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Indoors, hygiene, careful nutrition to ensure colostrum production and checking all lambs have sucked has proved the key to cutting watery mouth and reducing antibiotics.

The shed is kept clean using a lot of straw. A rule of thumb – or perhaps, rule of knee – is that Mr Baber keeps the pens clean and dry enough to kneel down without having to wear waterproof leggings.

“If my knees are dry, I know the lambs are being kept clean,” he says.

Ewe nutrition is managed to ensure there is sufficient colostrum.

At lambing a rigorously applied scoring system is used to provide management information as each lamb is born.

Scoring system

- Lamb vigour
- Ease of lambing
- Ewe colostrum production
- Lamb size

Any poor scores mean the ewe is culled to improve flock genetics.

Mr Baber has also reduced antibiotic use for lameness. He targeted footrot 15 years ago using the five-point plan (see below).

The 'secret' is to reduce the footrot challenge by removing the persistent offenders and treating the 'one-off' cases rapidly.

Only one of the 1,100-ewe flock was lame when Mr Baber was interviewed

“It would be treated within 24 hours. That is crucial – to treat early,” Mr Baber adds.

Keeping disease out of the flock is another vital defence strategy.

“We breed all our own female replacements. If we do bring in one or two rams a year, they undergo a stringent six- to nine-month quarantine, with blood tests for disease,” Mr Baber says.

### Five point plan to combat Footrot (produced by FAI Farms)



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