

FUTURE ISSUES FOR VELVET HARVESTING



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ABSTRACT

The vicissitudes of the velvet market are well known. To parallel this, the future issues that affect harvesting will be equally dynamic. A NZ Industry still in its foetal stage -velvet harvesting has yet to survive challenges that range from the human concept of harvesting rights, through to the humans concepts of animal rights.

All these issues can be influenced in the direction we want - but can we all agree on which direction?

Introduction

The definition of issue is important to understand when digesting this paper. "Issue", in this context means, "Important topic for discussion between contending parties" - and to this I would add "requiring resolution."

Apart from real issues raised this year with velvet harvesting - any points of discussion raised in this paper are informed speculation. Like the volatile and unpredictable nature of the velvet market, none of the issues discussed may ever surface, others may take on great significance.

To consider just some of the issues, we must view the whole picture for velvet, harvesting - direct supervision (by a veterinarian) and indirect (by a trained and certificated lay person) marketing, development and research etc. All of the following issues are a "movable feast", with variables that change and may make any proposed issue in time look ridiculous as attitudes and circumstances change.

Indirect Supervision Velveting Programme

For the immediate future it is the indirect supervision programme for certificated Deer Farmers that is of importance. Strangely enough it is the Veterinarian who says, "I'll do things my way" that is the weak link in the programme for indirect supervision. This attitude taken by a small percentage of Vets is incredibly damaging. This variability of attitudes, standards and ethics is historic, but will ultimately steer the direction of the whole profession. Ask yourself - are you the main streamer or do your own ideas exceed the normal of the profession?

Will indirect Veterinary supervision of velvet harvesting last the distance?

As Veterinarians, we view this programme as indirect supervision for velvet removal. Some Farmers view it as their right to velveting drugs and velveting independence, failing to see completely the supervising component.

There is a wide demand among the deer industry to reduce the Veterinary input to the programme of indirect supervision. They say at the current level it is over the top! But what about next year, such a request is likely to continue - a continuous ratcheting down of veterinary input!

The ultimate challenge will come when it is requested that the Veterinarian is removed entirely from the loop. As with any learner - the tutor ultimately becomes redundant. Will this be our fate also?

The desire is also great amongst a small percentage of Deer Farmers for an honorary BVSc, to allow velveting by lay people on any property.

Further extension of this will be the creation of velveting gangs - who will go around on contract, "shearing velvet" - after all there is a gap in the market to provide such a convenient service!! This is the situation where the "puppy grew up!"

The education programme will need to continue to make that small percentage of Farmers realise that the issues of Welfare, Veterinary Supervision and Ethics etc are real. These are still foreign concepts to some.

Drug Supply, Classification and Suitability

Should the removal of Veterinary input occur the Veterinary supply of drugs will be a redundant concept. Such drugs will be sourced direct from the Wholesaler (no fat, middle man) or even from Stock and Station Agents, as we see with penicillin, selenium and many other dangerous chemicals.

An extremely important and historic precedent is about to be made - with Xylazine about to be reclassified - Farmers will have access to PAR Class II drugs by right, not just Class I. This will change the concept of indirect supervision forever. The importance of this can only be appreciated fully by considering the other drugs that sit in Class I, and the relative ease by which Xylazine will be finally exempted for use.

The argument over drug access has pivoted around Xylazine. But is chemical restraint for the administration of local anaesthetic and deVelveting likely to remain the restraint of choice? As Veterinarians, would we certificate this velvet antler for export as we do other edible products?? Is our profession being honest with ourselves or are we providing two standards of food safety?

Other Programmes, Other Surgery

What are the grounds for the certificated Farmer restricting their use of Xylazine to velveting only - what about amputations, examination of infected feet, calvings or for that matter dehorning cattle?

We run a dangerous path when we train people to a certain level, then restrict their activities to a narrow range. Surely this is why there is some resistance to return "drugs" to Veterinary Clinics in the non-velveting periods.

Programmes such as this velveting scheme could easily become forerunners for other training programmes for other surgical manipulations by lay persons. Couple this with Class II drug availability by lay persons and the concept balloons - Horse Gelding, Caesarians, AI/ET, etc. While the concept may seem somewhat distant, is the surgery or anaesthesia any more complex in these than velveting? All that is required is that this current velveting programme is adopted by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and we are into new territory.

Our current indirect supervision programme is being watched. Typically with the New Zealand Deer Industry we are the role model for other livestock industries in New Zealand - and deer industries elsewhere - Australia, Ireland, Canada.

The question we need to ask ourselves, "Are any of these concepts issues to the Veterinary Profession?" In this age, with free market policy and anti-protectionism sentiments popular, we would agree whole heartedly that these trends are of no concern. If other concerns such as welfare are satisfied then maybe we could just ignore what may happen?

Velveting Spikers

Currently many hundreds of Farmers are removing spiker velvet without analgesia of any form from thousands of stags. The premise that the stag does not feel anything arises from the fact that most spikes fit in between the jaws of tree lopers. This results in a painless easy procedure for the Farmer - not the stag. We know from incorrectly applied local nerve blocks that spikers exhibit strenuous head movements in response to velveting *when given time* -as in a crush and hand saw situation. This double standard of welfare does not allow us any credibility - so let us get our act cleaned up!!

Effective Analgesia

The procedure of applying local anaesthetic by some operators is lip service only. This is because inadequate time for effect is allowed. Also the emphasis of re-applying local when pain sensation is still present must continue. While we do not agree with the British stance of a general anaesthetic being required - there may be a point in their argument - local anaesthetic ring blocks are sometimes difficult to apply. Let us constantly appraise our skills in this area.

Will Velveting Continue?

On a wider perspective, what makes us think that velveting is a practice that will continue in New Zealand?

Very few people who really matter when it comes to representing the green view have been exposed to this procedure - to the same extent as other issues of hot topic. To the uninitiated, velveting is rather bloody, purposefully inflicted and repetitive - unlike any other harvest. Are there Practitioners and Farmers who are becoming squeamish with this surgery??

The New Zealand SPCA campaign to ban battery egg production is no wet squib. Talk of referendums to destroy that particular method of egg production with an absence of alternatives is significant!

Never underestimate the value of constant contact maintained by this industry with New Zealand SPCA, and the current sanction of velveting based on the current "Code of Recommendations", long may it continue. However, many other groups that are "leaf green" in comparison to SPCA exist, and the SPCA maybe the damp squib. Who is to say these other groups will not target velvet harvesting.

Velvet Pharmacology and Synthetic Analogues

What is it the millions of Asians over centuries have sought after in velvet? Clearly millions of Asian cannot be wrong - there must be some chemical or groups of chemicals that are responsible for the next to "elixir of life" qualities that velvet antler seems to have. As velvet consumption by the Western world continues to expand - wouldn't they prefer a synthetic analogue to the real McCoy? Maybe at a significant price differential the "Asian Millions" may suddenly accept and prefer the analogue as well. So what then do you do with velvet - you let it go hard. Then what happens - hard antler causes a welfare problem!

Are Antlers Necessary?

Maybe it would be easier if Farmers had antlerless stags - new generation "Hummels", mating hinds for intensive venison units. But then we need a ready to use technique of polling for stags - it may come.

Are Veterinarians Necessary for Direct Supervision?

In the long term what velveting will the Veterinarian be doing? All the larger herds will be self sufficient with certificated lay people, and with "Hummels" serving the other properties - what is left?

The Veterinarian Professions Response

Historically, the contending parties have been the Associations for Veterinarians and Deer Farmers. Despite this, some of the possible issues we face in the future, may well be fought together, as the past and immediate squabbles wane, and the possible battle to even harvest velvet antler in New Zealand begins!!

Need any of these issues worry us? If we are fatalistic, then just ignore these issues and the great tide will take you where it wishes. On the other hand, if we are serious about our velveting future, steer the issues, and steer the future.