

Experiences and Observations of a TAO

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of the findings after my carrying out the practical and oral section section of the assessment as set out by the Deer Tb Control Standards Committee on veterinarians wishing to become Veterinary Testing Officers (VTOs).

Keywords

Testing, assessing, tuberculosis, veterinarians, deer

Introduction

I began testing as a veterinary testing officer (VTO) assessor (TAO) in February 1998, and to date have assessed 26 vets, but in assembling this paper for presentation, I have consulted with six other TAOs in order to present a broader picture of the present situation. Their results confirm my own findings, which were that a considerable majority of those tested performed competently.

I propose to briefly work through the assessment form, commenting where necessary.

Practical

Equipment

On several occasions the McLintoch guns were not working properly when tested. The vets concerned were obviously surprised when this happened, and did have access to other replacement guns on the day, but the question must be asked: Would each of these guns have been tested before being used in the field?

Due to the highly allergenic nature of tuberculin, the pressure test should always be carried out using water, as instructed in the manual. This needs to be remembered, as there may be the temptation to pressure-test the tuberculin-loaded gun, thus creating potentially harmful aerosols.

Light

50 Lux for aging veterinarians is akin to a situation in which Pakistani batsmen would appeal against the light (as Chris *Crickett*, known to be something of a player himself, would confirm).

Seriously though, I found that light rapidly became the major factor in seeing the bleb. There was definitely a problem for the older vets. On several occasions, when the sky was overcast, the deer needed to be positioned near the best light source for the bleb to be seen.

Accordingly, it would seem fair to consider whether, when necessary in a field situation, deer are moved to an adequate light source for their tuberculin injections.

The Clipping

The Laube clippers fitted with an A40 blade gave consistently good site clips. The Allflex, MAF backpack, Heinekin, and Laser clippers were adequate only if the blades were properly set. All gear fails if the blades are blunt. On several occasions the tests had to be delayed, while the clippers were reset. At least one vet had to borrow the TAO's own clippers so the assessment could proceed.

During conversations with some vets, I understood that they usually used Heinekin clippers because they were faster. But on the test day, they were using Laube clippers. Test day - ordinary day, why the difference?

From my observations I could see that the hair length after clipping was often over 4mm—and measuring confirmed this—especially where non-Laube-type clippers had been used. Where Laube clippers *had* been used the site clipped was often less than 10cm square. On test day several of the vets would have failed on their first attempt at producing satisfactory clip sites.

After being shown that the hair was still too long, or the site too small the vets concerned corrected the problem. The test only required five sites to be clipped—which took several minutes for some vets—yet I have heard (and I'm sure that you have too) that there are vets who can clip and inject hundreds of deer in a short time.

The Bleb

There were wide variations in expertise. Most achieved 100% success immediately; a small group managed to pass after several second attempts, while a few had to begin all over again with a second set of deer. I got the strong impression that consistently identifying the blebs was a new experience for several of the vets. The presence of the bleb, as we all know, is the indication that the tuberculin has been injected intradermally, and seeing the bleb is the check. Are some of us placing too much reliance on the allergenic properties of tuberculin?

Observation on the Practical

Handling techniques fell into three major groups:

1. Vets who were very competent in handling deer, and had been obviously well trained and/or learned through experience;
2. Vets who assured me they had had little formal training, but who, through their innate sense of stockmanship, were able to handle deer well; and
3. Vets who were not competent handlers, because of insufficient training, and/or lacking an adequate sense of stockmanship.

Poor deer handlers do not reflect well on our profession. Therefore it is up to us ensure that handling skills reach a satisfactory standard—through training and encouragement by one's peers, as well as physical audits as required.

Another point, which needs to be raised here, is the standard of facilities on farms. I consider that for far too long, some members of our profession have accepted that sub-standard facilities are part of the ethos. For some of the battle-scarred among us, working with deer in inadequate sheds and yards, is like a rough and yet somehow enjoyable game of rugby. For others, it means a real fear of injury, which often leads to overuse of chemical restraint to counter the poor facilities. A further group avoids contact with poor facilities/difficult deer by getting a colleague to make the calls, or moving out of deer practice. Too often potentially able deer practitioners are forced to learn the hard way, at some cost.

The profession needs to take a unified stand regarding handling facilities. For something as routine as a Tb test should chemical restraint be used at all? You will all know farms where the excellence of the facilities means no use of chemical restraint even with fractious deer.

Why have some deer farmers been allowed to dictate the environment in which we must work? Could it be because some among us are happy to work in such environments? Or is it simply a question of our ethos, our financial needs, or our loyalty to our clients?

Oral

General Comments

This was virtually an open-book test, and most vets had adequately prepared themselves to answer the questions. However, at least one had not done so, and consequently had to re-sit the test.

It was noticeable that those vets, who have not had experience with Tb, were not comfortably familiar with aspects of the regime, e.g. movement restrictions, timing, and the use of white tags. Similarly, those who work in areas where Tb is endemic were less than comfortable with the use of the CCT.

With regard to the question: What can you do if you disagree with an aspect of the test specifications? Well--by assessment day, no-one told me that they had contemplated writing to the Animal Health Board or the Tb Quality Standards Committee, requesting revision with technical justification. My inference from this is that although the vets may have been unhappy with some of the specifications, they have accepted them. Therefore, it should follow that the specifications will be adhered to.

My middle initial is C., which used to stand for Catherine, but now stands for Compliance. Even so I am still not good at filling in forms. After doing these assessments, I have found I am not alone in this. Several of the forms checked were not completed correctly. Many mistakes were of a minor nature, but shouldn't we all be striving for total accuracy?

Summary

Overall people prepared well for the assessment, by using good facilities, good deer, and good help. Therefore there were generally no surprises.

Despite what may seem to be a negative aspect to this paper, most people had no problem with the assessment. Most found the whole process to be of benefit to them, because they became more familiar with the manual, looked closely at their own knowledge and practice, and learned from it. Of this group, about 10% of the vets needed assistance to pass, but were happy to acknowledge this. Unfortunately, a very small number of the group, which required assistance, barely admitted to having any problems, and were still happy with their performance.

Tb-testing in the field can have surprises. The clippers fail to work adequately, the gun seems to have air in it, the sun goes behind a cloud, the deer become fractious, it's been a long day, and there are only a few deer left to test. The only person in control of such a situation, its outcome, and ramifications, is you.