Leptospirosis and the farming family

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“I would not wish this on my worst enemy – I was so ill that I thought I would die.”

“We had to leave the farm, our friends, the kid’s schools and their friends. We bought a house in town facing some fields but it was never the same. We never recovered financially.”

These are just two quotes from Rural Women members when asked to tell their stories about their involvement with leptospirosis.

Leptospirosis is a disease with widespread consequences. What is astounding is the emotional pain that remains long after the physical illness has passed.

As vets, you understand the physiological effects on the animal and there has been a huge amount of research into the effects on the animals as well as the prevention of this disease in other animals.

Rural Women New Zealand too has been involved in the leptospirosis fight, having run two very successful campaigns, the first in the 80’s which raised about $150,000 for research into leptospirosis in the dairy and pig industry.

In 2007 – 2008 the second fundraising and awareness campaign was undertaken, rising over $107,000 to be used in the research by Massey into leptospirosis, in particular freezing workers. The awareness raised in groups such as farmers, rural workers and medical professionals was priceless.

This shows the value of the research-community interface – that scientists and community groups are working together is of huge importance – so there is a synergistic effect of research and awareness to help try and overcome this disease.

What I wish to raise with you today is the consequences of this disease, and how it affects individuals, families, businesses and whole communities, economically, socially, emotionally and physically.

We need to look at the animal-human interface- how the stock having the disease affects people and how humans are affected when they contract leptospirosis.

Let’s look at the flow on effect of the stock getting leptospirosis. Firstly, it is the lost income from the subclinical cases, as production drops, then the cost of lost income from very sick animals and those who die from the disease. It is the cost of animal health to diagnose and treat animals, and prevention treatments for at risk stock, as well as buying replacement stock. These economic costs on already stretched budgets lead to huge stresses within the affected farming families, with cost cutting and tightening of belts happening, so less money is spent in local businesses. Sometimes it gets so severe that the farm needs to be sold and the family leave the area, a social and economic loss to the community, school and businesses. Sometimes the stress gets to the point that marriages and families break up under the strain.

And what are the costs if a family member contracts this disease? There is health, emotional, social and economic costs, and each can be huge no matter which member of the family gets it.
Leptospirosis and the farming family

Let’s start with our happy rural family-on a single family unit farm, with Dad-Sam*, Mum-Jane*, and Ben* and Sarah*, two school aged children. Sam works the farm fulltime but helps out with a bit of shearing and casual work in the area to make a bit of extra income. Jane works part time in town and on the farm the rest of the time. The two kids are at the local school, where Jane is involved on the PTA as well as other local organisations, such as Rural Women New Zealand.

What happens if Sam contracts lepto, from working in the yards, shearing, doing dog tuckers or muttons, or digging in dirt, or working anywhere that infected animals have urinated?

Depending on the severity of the case, it will mean a long illness and recovery and in a severe case, death. Heath-wise the costs are huge, as he is unable to work for a very long time, if ever again, and most likely have recurrences of the symptoms. Like this person said: “Tiredness and joint pain still persist, he has lost all motivation”.

Emotionally the stress on the family of having a sick husband and father is incredible – not knowing when or if he will get better, there are hospital and doctor visits, and often a family split as the children end up staying with other family members or friends while Jane looks after Sam at hospital or at home as well as trying to fit in everything else, it is hugely unsettling for them all, and the children may take a long time to get over the unsettling time and may suffer with long term emotional and learning issues.

Economically it is a strain, as either Jane has to quit work to look after the farm, or a worker need to be found & paid for. There is a high probability of productivity loss. There is one story from a member saying their cows died due to the negligence of a ‘trusted farm worker’ employed through an agency to milk while they were ill – a financial and emotional stress to an already sick couple – who pays for this? Then if it comes to it, the farm may need to be leased or sold if things get too tough, often leading to the family moving away, leaving a hole in the community – one less family at the school, spending money at local businesses, or taking part in community events. Once a hole like this appears, it is often very hard to fill.

How about these stories:

“My baby was two weeks old when my husband contracted lepto. I had to stop breastfeeding so that I could leave him while I did all the work on the farm. I still feel guilty, like I had abandoned him.”

“My husband is now very weak and unable to work through lepto infection. Ironically he suffered less and recovered from bowel cancer during those years with lepto.”

How about if Jane contracts the disease from helping in the yards or woolshed? The pressure now shifts on to Sam, while she is in hospital or at home recuperating. Her part time job, which often finances the groceries or extras for the family is gone, extra help is needed for the farm, which Sam is trying to do as well as look after the children, who may need to stay away, or have someone come in to help, which again is very unsettling.

This is what our ladies had to say:

“Our family had to be split up as we were unable to care for the kids. They were strangers by the time we could get them back again. It is really affecting our relationship. Whatever the cost to inoculate- it costs nothing compared to your life.”

“My baby had to be delivered prematurely, I could not look after it, and so it was raised by other family.”

How tough are scenarios like this on families – what ongoing effects are felt by all?

But then what happens if one of the children get sick, infected while playing in the yards, the woolshed or even in a puddle where infected animals have been? What then? The economic pressure may not be there, but the emotional costs will be huge for the whole family, with the guilt felt that their child caught leptospirosis. While the child will affected physically and emotionally from being so sick, as well as socially by missing out on school and getting behind, and missing the social contact with friends.

All these scenarios lead to economic, social, health and emotional costs, affecting the individual, the family unit, the extended family, and friends, and the whole social and business community.

As these comments state: “So much grief for lost opportunities, the job, the lifestyle, when will it end?” and “Months even years are taken from people’s lives in the community.”
No matter how long ago they had the disease, victims and families remain terribly traumatised by the impacts, like it happened yesterday. So what can we do to reduce these costs? How can we prevent the drain on our rural communities? How do we stop things like: “After I contracted lepto, my husband was so terrified of the disease he sold the farm”?

Well, we are already doing it, with the synergistic research-community interface.

With all the good work done by researchers into the disease - what it is, what it does, how it is contracted and how we can prevent other stock contracting it, the number of infected stock will drop and processes put into place to prevent further stock and human infections either by vaccination or sanitary practices.

Then there is the awareness of the disease which has been raised, and where further work can be done - how to prevent stock getting infected, and importantly what practices rural workers can put into place to lower the risk of them contacting leptospirosis. This is something that you as vets and community organisations such as Rural Women New Zealand can work together on to raise further awareness to all groups such as rural workers, employers and health professionals. As one rural doctor said after our awareness campaign: “I have never tested much for leptospirosis, but now I will take it more seriously”. We also know that those who have become aware of the disease are more likely to pressure for the test if they are ill.

Finally there is the support network required to help those affected by leptospirosis. This is where Rural Women New Zealand is so strong. We can do this in a number of ways. Firstly at a local level helping the individuals and families sometimes with food, sometimes with financial support, always with moral support by someone helping out or just someone to listen and help sort issues out. In some areas there is our health service, Access Home Health, which can help with nursing, or house work and so forth, so is a help to families. At a national level, Rural Women New Zealand can help in a number of ways. We can give financial relief to families, and use our collective power to make a difference, such as our fundraisers, or to put pressure on decision makers for funding or policy changes.

The opportunities for greater interagency collaboration at a community level need to be investigated and initiatives put into place to get this up and going.

We need to recognise the impacts on families and communities beyond the disease, give the specific support, and join together for research beyond just the disease, and do research specific to the social impacts.

Like that famous phrase says – “it won’t happen overnight, but it will happen” – we are already seeing the results from the research and awareness campaigns. Let’s keep it up so less of our stock is infected, meaning better returns for our farmers and less of our rural workers and families contracting leptospirosis, leading to more healthy happy families staying on to help grow our dynamic rural communities.

Please note: * Not real names or relating to real people

Thank you to those who shared their experiences with Leptospirosis.

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