

Contributors

Peter Davies
npgdavies@blueyonder.co.uk

Mike Fitzpatrick
fitz@easynet.co.uk

Neville Goodman
Nev.W.Goodman@bris.ac.uk

Ali Hasan

Roger Jones
roger.jones@kcl.ac.uk

Richard Lehman
edgar.lehman@btopenworld.com

Malcolm McCoubrie
mccoubri@sgul.ac.uk

Saul Miller
saulmiller@doctors.org.uk

Jim Newmark
Jim@jabt.demon.co.uk

John Spicer

James Willis
james@jarwillis.fsnet.co.uk

Saul Miller

Fertility versus longevity

How long do sheep live? As any shepherd will tell you, nobody knows. Why not? Because the woolly things never live long enough for us to find out. They are all converted to shanks and cutlets well before they have had time to rue their past mistakes. Even those that do survive long enough to develop muscles that might challenge our delicate Western gnashers end up as meat of a sort: they are cleverly represented as the elephant legs from which our kebabs are cut on the way back from the pub, long after our discernment has been disabled.

Why does this matter anyway? Well, our five elderly sheep, at least one of whom needs, but is not yet getting, glucosamine (consider her stiff but organic), have recently suffered the indignity of an invasion. They are now sharing their turf with a giggle of young girls. Worst of all for the old baas, the young ones are all attending antenatal classes and looking forward to the patter of tiny hooves in Spring. Which means any day now we will have a population crisis: five will have become 20.

On a global scale this is not yet serious enough that the UN is likely to help out by allowing us to annex a neighbouring (e)state. They won't even let Tanzania do that and it has a bigger problem: its population, currently the same as that of Poland at 38.6 million, is set to be twice that of Poland by 2050. This problem might be bigger, but note that the cause — a young, fertile population who refuse to die off as they should and just get older instead, popping periodically as they do — is the same.

In fact, given that there is no strategy at all for trying to put a lid on population growth generally here on planet Earth, looking elsewhere for ideas is no good. Every minute 261 babies are born to this world but only 108 of our fellow humans pop their clogs. This is such a staggering imbalance that I consider it a miracle some aren't killed by a landslide on the placenta mountain that must be building somewhere, given the

74 thousand tonnes of afterbirth produced annually.

The utter failure of being organic to help kill off some of our flock is now leading me to question whether the same principle works in reverse: if not using medicines does not shorten life, does using the stuff extend it? I have certainly spent enough time trying to persuade patients that the answer to this is yes that it will be ironic for me to change my mind. Cheaper for the NHS mind you.

It seems cruel to cope with overpopulation by allowing it to follow its own natural course of precipitating a famine. Sad, skinny sheep bleating weakly from a meadow-turned-dustbowl might just get my neighbours agitated enough to report me to the General Medical Council. No doubt they could find a way to strike me off for such apparent neglect and then I would not be able to afford the feed with which I might rescue the situation.

No, when all is said and done, the only answer to population growth is to match it with population death and as much as I might like the matter to occur naturally, as bird flu might yet do for us humans, the prospect of this is now looking slim. Our oldest sheep are about 13 and stiff legs, by the use of multiple linear regression, have been shown to be a poor sign of imminent demise.

Food safety law allows the killing and butchery of one's own animals for one's own consumption. Squeamish initially, we are coming round to the idea of using this facility.

Perhaps we might even start a trend. How stylish would it be? Our own elephant leg.