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Stanley M. Dennis

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Starvation/Mismothering

— a major cause of lambing losses

By S. M. DENNIS, B.V.Sc., Ph.D., Senior Veterinary Pathologist

RESULTS of the preliminary survey into the infectious causes of perinatal lamb mortalities carried out last year by the Department of Agriculture showed that starvation/mismothering was the most important single cause of death.

It was responsible for nearly half of the deaths that occurred during the first three days of life.

The second largest cause of neonatal death was weakness at birth and this group was responsible for a quarter of the losses. Together, starvation/mismothering and weakness at birth accounted for almost three-quarters of the lambs examined in this survey that died during the neonatal period—the first three days of life.

Environmental conditions and methods of management make it difficult to separate starvation and mismothering. Unless the ewes are under close observation so that evidence of satisfactory mothering behaviour may be ascertained—whether the lamb is a twin or not; or the ewe examined for signs of cut or blocked teats, no milk, or mastitis; signs of sickness and so on—then it is impossible to make a definite diagnosis of mismothering. In this survey no attempt was made to separate starvation from mismothering, both for the reasons listed above and because they are closely related and the effects of one can intensify the other. The two conditions were considered together as starvation/mismothering.

Starvation . . .

Lambs are born alive with substantial reserves of body fat and tissue fluids. Providing that the lamb is not suffering from any disease and is not subject to any lethal environmental stresses such as chilling, the lamb will remain alive for two or three days.

During this time the starving lamb is active, seeking its mother and trying to obtain milk from other ewes. Ultimately it may nibble at grass and may fill its stomach with grass and sand. The lamb does not die until all the body fat reserves are completely used up, the normal whitish firm fatty tissue being reduced to soft, red, gelatinous tissue and the lamb is dehydrated. This is referred to as uncomplicated starvation.

In cases of complicated starvation, death has been accelerated either by infection, exposure or predators.

Starving Lambs Easy Prey

Lambs suffering from starvation/mismothering are easy prey for predators and the results of this survey suggested that they may be an important item of diet for foxes and crows in many areas. According to most of the farmers interviewed, 1963 appeared to be a particularly bad year for both foxes and crows. These predators, particularly crows, were ever on the look-out for a dead or dying lamb.

Climatic stresses were shown to accelerate pending neonatal deaths. A distinct causal relationship exists between starvation/mismothering on one hand and exposure on the other.

The predisposing causes of starvation/mismothering include neonatal weakness from any cause such as disease, prolonged birth, light or heavy lambs; multiple births; undernutrition of the ewe, particularly during the last six to eight weeks of pregnancy; faulty milk supply—may be due to no milk, thick milk, cut or blind teats or mastitis; sick or dead ewes; climatic conditions such as heat, cold, rain, wind, no shelter; management; accidents; congenital malformations.

What Can Be Done?

What can be done about these losses?

First, it is essential to be aware of the causes and extent of these losses due to starvation and mismothering.
Second, to consider what steps you can take to reduce them.

Because of the large sheep breeding areas in the State, the different times of lambing and the existence or non-existence of clover disease on the properties it is not practical to make general recommendations. There are four measures, however, that are considered to be of value in reducing lamb wastage due to starvation and mismothering and these are:

- Check the udders after shearing or before mating.
- Ensure that pregnant ewes receive adequate feed particularly during the last six to eight weeks of pregnancy. This is important with autumn lambing.
- Lamb in a sheltered paddock or one containing plenty of shelter from trees, suckers, tussocks, and so on.
- Lamb ewes in short wool.

Your awareness of the enormous lamb wastage that occurs annually and your efforts to reduce these losses will help to overcome the present acute shortage of sheep in Western Australia.

SHEEP ABORTION SURVEY

THE Animal Health Laboratory of the Department of Agriculture plans to continue the survey commenced last year to determine the incidence of infectious abortion and perinatal lamb mortalities in sheep and to identify the micro-organisms responsible.

The results to date are encouraging and indicate that further investigations are required. Two diseases have been diagnosed for the first time as a result of the survey and another has been shown to be a cause of abortion in ewes as well as epididymitis in rams.

The success of this work depends on your co-operation in reporting promptly any abortions or suspected abortions, or increased perinatal lamb losses, to the nearest Department of Agriculture veterinary surgeon, agricultural adviser or stock inspector.

Without this co-operation, investigations of this nature are impossible.

Successful study of abortion outbreaks requires specimens of aborted lambs and placental membranes (afterbirth) in the freshest possible condition. The chances of making a diagnosis in an outbreak of abortion increase with the number of specimens examined, and the fresher they are the better.

If no Departmental officers are conveniently available we recommend that you forward the specimens by rail or bus, or better still, personally bring them directly to the Animal Health Laboratory at South Perth.

Warning.—As some of the agents which cause infectious abortion in sheep can be transmitted to man strict hygiene should be observed in handling affected animals or animal tissues.
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<td>Top Brand Juice Extractor</td>
<td>£23 9 6</td>
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<td>Ironing Board with Step Stool</td>
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<td>£12 9 6</td>
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<td>Kerosene Heater</td>
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<td>Carpet Squares, 12 ft. x 9 ft., sp/rubber backed</td>
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<td>2 Brush Polisher, special</td>
<td>£19 19 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electric Frypans: 11 inch</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 inch</td>
<td>£16 9 6</td>
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<td>Combination Robe: 5 ft. Maple, 6 drawers, mirror front, 3 ft. hanging space</td>
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<td>Divan Bases discounted to</td>
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<td>Queen Anne Suite</td>
<td>£189 10 0</td>
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<td>Bedroom Suite, double</td>
<td>£79 0 0</td>
<td>£59 19 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bedroom Suite, single, 4 ft. sliding door robe, bookcase headunit, laminated drawer fronts</td>
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<td>Rubber Mattresses, 3 ft. wide</td>
<td>£23 0 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 ft. 6 in. x 6 in. deep, reversible</td>
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