Milk fever in ewes, pre and post lambing

by District Veterinarian Tim Biffin

Given the time of year, it is somewhat expected that we have been seeing an increase in the amount of hypocalcaemia (milk fever) cases in pregnant and lambing ewes. This disease is often fatal for affected ewes and is caused when the ewe is not able to meet the calcium requirements associated with rearing young, i.e., they have low blood calcium levels.

Producers often note that the affected animals (usually 1-2% of the mob) are peri-parturient (around lambing) and found bright and alert lying down either on their side or sternum.

Many cases investigated have been feeding calcium as a supplement, however, they have recently stopped or there is not enough trough space provided, given the size of the mob. Once having considered these provisions affected ewes should be treated individually. Ideally this includes:

- shed or hospital paddock care
- their lambs weaned and potty raised immediately
- treatment with 75-100mL “VET-CAL 4 in 1” under the skin (three times a day)
- sling lifted >4 times a day for at least 30 min

The following table is a list of predisposing factors for peri-parturient milk fever and their preventative actions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predisposing factor</th>
<th>Prevention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>• Manage separately</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• High quality feed (esp. 4wks prior to lambing, throughout lambing, and 4wks post lambing)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple bearing ewes</td>
<td>• As above</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• + pregnancy scan to be able to draft off “singles, twins and empties”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mineral imbalance (from feed)</td>
<td>• Ad lib mineral supplement 4wks prior to lambing, throughout lambing, and 4wks post lambing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ~33% salt (NaCl), ~33% limestone (CaCO₃), 33% Causmag (Magnesium oxide) is generally appropriate</td>
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<td>• Ensure there is enough trough</td>
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space for all animals given the size of the mob

- If the troughs are frequently observed empty or animals are observed eating clay around the dam, they are probably not getting enough of the mineral supplement.

Cereals and cereal crops (esp. wheat) > grass pasture > legume pastures have poor Ca:P ratios. Emphasizing the need for calcium supplementation.

| Underlying issues conditions e.g. lameness | Monitoring stock and treating appropriately eg foot abscess sheep
- If you don’t know what the condition is but you know it’s abnormal don’t hesitate to call your district veterinarian.

| Overweight ewes | Body Condition Scores (BCS) of 3/5 at lambing, no greater.

| Harsh conditions (cold, windy & wet) | Provide hay as an energy source. It will help them to keep warm.
- Large paddock rocks, trees, long grasses, rolling hills may all be useful so long as the pasture feed is appropriate and you can monitor them.

- If the mob is off shears, shed them for a day or two, until the weather dries up (while providing hay).

The classic hypocalcaemic ewe having given birth 1 week ago, lying down, bright and alert but unable to rise.

A group of periparturient ewes mobbing a drum of loose lick mineral supplement.

**Grass tetany alert**

Over the past few weeks, there has been a sharp increase in the number of diagnosed and reported cases of grass tetany in the region.

Grass tetany is a metabolic disease that affects cattle and sheep, associated with low levels of magnesium in the blood. Grass tetany is a
complex disorder, but the most common causes around this time of year are cattle under environmental stressors, lactation and mustering. In addition to this, animals rapidly growing on short young grasses or lush cereals are most affected.

Often the only signs most farmers note with grass tetany is sudden death. There is usually frothing from the mouth and nose, and there are usually signs of where the animal has moved violently prior to death. Cows may show signs when disturbed or yarded. These are often displayed as nervous signs: arching of the head back, muscle spasms, convulsions, walking stiffly/galloping madly and going down with the inability to get up.

Treatment focuses on returning magnesium levels back to normal by injecting solutions containing magnesium into the affected animals.

Prevention of grass tetany focuses on providing animal’s easy access to supplements, such as hay treated with Causmag on an ad lib basis. The daily requirement of Causmag for cattle is 60g/head/day but up to 100g/head/day may be necessary in some instances. After a feeding regime has begun, it takes two-three days for stock to be protected, with protection ceasing once supplementation has ceased.

If you suspect grass tetany is affecting your herd, contact your nearest Riverina Local Land Services District Veterinarian or your local private practitioner for further information and advice.

Lamb survival considerations by District Veterinarian, Eliz Braddon

With lambs starting to appear in most paddocks across the Riverina, a discussion on lamb survival is timely, particularly with the ongoing cold, rainy conditions.

Some common causes of lamb mortality in our region are Starvation-Mismothering-Exposure (SME) complex; dystocia (difficult births), predation and infectious causes. The greatest percentage of lamb mortalities are due to the first three in our experience. The most critical time for lambs is in the first 48 hours after birth.

Factors affecting lamb survival include

- birth weight
- shelter
- maternal behaviour

An ideal birth weight range for lambs is between 4.5kg and 5.5kg generally for Merinos. Lambs lighter than 4.0kg are more susceptible to cold exposure and generally are less vigorous at birth so may not feed as quickly. Larger lambs (>6kg) are at a much higher risk of causing delivery difficulties (e.g. Dystocia) and therefore death if they are not discovered and assisted very quickly.

Lamb birth weight is primarily influenced by ewe body weights so good ewe nutrition all through pregnancy is the key to reducing this as a factor.

Newborn lambs have a very high surface area: body weight ratio which makes them much more susceptible to temperature changes. Combine a newborn lamb that is already wet from birth fluids, wind, rain and cold winter temperatures and death can be very quick due to exposure. Lambing in paddocks with shelter options will help to mitigate this issue – rocks, tree lines, hills etc.

Maiden ewes and ewes in poor condition (<2.5) or on poor nutrition are the most likely to desert their lambs. Ewes having multiple lambs can also desert lambs due to a poor maternal bond. Grooming of the newborn lamb is essential for that ewe:lamb bond. It is ideal for the ewe and lamb/s to stay at the birth site for four to six hours to ensure that this bond can be founded. Disturbances of any kind that interrupt this key maternal bonding time, will potentially result in lambs being left behind.

In addition to the formation of the ewe:lamb bond, ewes that have poor udder confirmation (due to shearing injuries or mastitis) or low milk volumes will lead to the starvation in the lambs and a lack of colostral intake.
What are the key things to maximize lamb survival then:

Ensure ewes are receiving adequate nutrition all through lambing to optimise birth weights, maternal behaviour and milk volume.

- Lamb in sheltered paddocks or move them if necessary, when severe inclement weather is predicted.
- Minimise disturbance of ewes and lambs at birth by making observations from a distance and with as little fuss as possible. Having ewes used to vehicles entering the paddock with ensure that monitoring during lambing is not an invasive process.

For more discussion on this topic or to diagnose lamb mortality issues on your property, contact your local district veterinarian for assistance.

Welcome Courtney Simkin – District Veterinarian Hay

We are very happy to welcome Courtney Simkin to our Hay office. Courtney will be the new district veterinarian based at Hay. Currently Courtney is working Monday, Wednesday and Thursday and can be contacted on Courtney Simkin 6993 1403 or courtney.simkin@lls.nsw.gov.au.

Upcoming events

Beefing Up Your Cattle Enterprise

Speakers include:

- Alison McIntosh, AJM Livestock Solutions - electronic identification systems
- Brian Cumming, Agriculture consultants - utilising BreedPlan and EBV
- Tom Graham, Coolac Veterinary Services - bull selection
- Kristy Stone, Riverina Local Land Services - biosecurity & current livestock issues

When: 9:00am - 4:00pm Friday 29 July 2016
Where: The Elms, 1098 West Gilmore Rd Tumut
What to bring: Chair, hat, boots
RSVP for catering: Cherie White 02 6941 1402 or cherie.white@lls.nsw.gov.au

EH Graham Centre – Beef Forum

Wagga Wagga, NSW
August 5, 2016

Lamb Ex 2016

Albury, NSW
August 10-12, 2016

Henty Machinery Field Days 2016

Henty NSW
September 20-22, 2016

KEY CHANGES TO BOVINE JOHES DISEASE CONTROL IN NSW – EFFECTIVE JULY 1 2016

A number of changes will occur under the new ‘JD in cattle’ Framework.

Deregulation and removal of zoning: most state/territory jurisdictions are on-track to remove regulation by 1 July 2016.

Ceasing of quarantining of properties as a control measure.

Movement to a market-driven approach where producers undertake practices dependent on market requirements.
Riverina Local Land Services
District Veterinarians

Please note new office numbers

Wagga Wagga
Tim Biffin and Emily Stearman
6923 0900

Young
Elizabeth Braddon and Rahul Shankar
6381 4700

Gundagai
Kristy Stone
6940 6900

Hay
Courtney Simkin
6993 1403

Narrandera
Gabrielle Morrice
6958 1800

PRODUCER ALERT

Keep alert for foot problems developing in the coming months.

Heavy pregnant ewes will be at risk of foot abscess due to increased body weights and soft wet ground underfoot.

Never rule out the presence of Virulent Footrot in a flock with high percentages of lameness. Particularly likely with recent introductions of stock.

If you are experiencing high levels of lameness in your flocks, give your Local Land Services district veterinarian a call.