

NADIS Health Bulletin



Knowledge transfer to farmers

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Health Quiz

Lambing Problems (dystocia)

Phil Scott DVM&S, DipECBHM, CertCHP, DSHP, FRCVS

Dealing with a vaginal (Fig 1) or uterine prolapse (Fig 2) and difficult lambing cases can present a dilemma to the busy farmer who is unable to correct the problem but considers it too expensive to call the vet and too busy to take the ewe to the surgery - valid reasons or weak excuses? What is the current situation on most sheep farms? Have there been any recent veterinary developments in treating such problems? What should farmers consider this year when presented with an obstetrical problem in their sheep?

Current situation

Ewe deaths in lowground flocks in the UK are often quoted as 5 to 7 per cent per annum with many losses associated with dystocia whether immediately (ruptured uterus [Figs 3-4], blood loss), within several days (metritis [Fig 5], peritonitis, uterine prolapse) or after several weeks with bacterial infection localising in internal organs such as the heart (endocarditis).

There has been a disturbing trend in the United Kingdom over the past 10 years towards less veterinary care for ovine obstetrical problems despite success rates exceeding 97 per cent for caesarean operations undertaken on the farm (Fig 6). Data collected by 31 veterinary practices throughout the UK reveal one veterinary visit for obstetrical problems per 2,500 sheep equivalent to one veterinary visit every five years to the average UK flock. As a consequence farmers may be unaware of recent benefits in veterinary care of obstetrical problems.

A recent study asking why sheep farmers did not request veterinary assistance for dystocia cases reported that 33 per cent of 183 respondents quoted excessive professional fees, while 31 per cent of farmers considered themselves as competent as their veterinary surgeon in such matters.

The monthly total of lambing cases attended by 31 NADIS veterinary practices serving farmers with 575,000 breeding sheep are shown in Graphs 1-4. These graphs reflect the economic value of individual sheep and provision of veterinary care whereby as many caesarean operations are performed during January/February (0.2 million pedigree Suffolk, Texel and other terminal sire breed

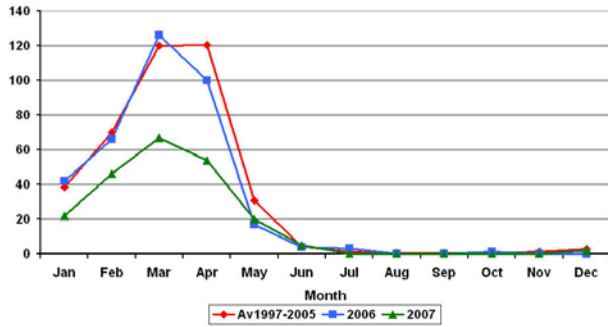


Fig 1: What is the best method to treat a vaginal prolapse?



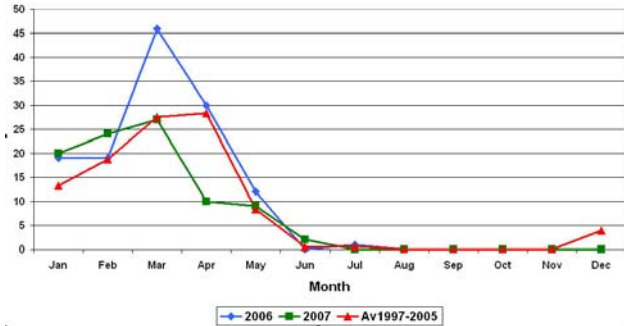
Fig 2: What is the best method to treat a uterine prolapse?

Dystocias - Sheep



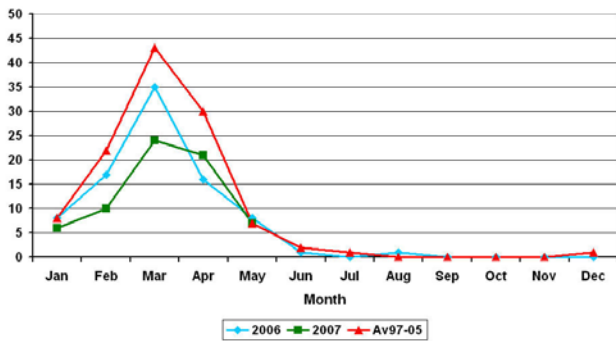
Graph 1 : Monthly total of lambing cases performed by 31 NADIS veterinary practices serving farmers.

Caesareans - Sheep



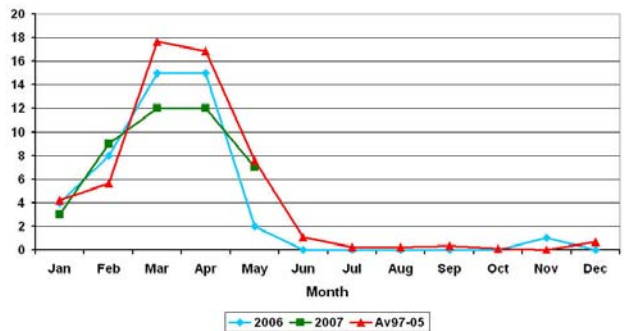
Graph 2: Monthly total of caesarean operations performed by 31 NADIS veterinary practices.

Vaginal Prolapse - Sheep



Graph 3: Monthly total of vaginal prolapse cases attended by 31 NADIS veterinary practices.

Uterine Prolapse - Sheep



Graph 4: Monthly total of uterine prolapse cases attended by 31 NADIS veterinary practices.

ewes) as during March (approximately 8-10 million crossbred commercial value ewes)

A comprehensive review of lambing problems is recommended with particular reference to hygiene, antibiotic therapy and pain relief (analgesia).

Hygiene/approach to dystocia cases

In a study of 95 farms, arm-length disposable plastic gloves were always used on 29 farms during assisted lambing, six farms used gloves for most lambings, eight farms occasionally, while the majority (55%) never used gloves. More than one third of shepherds neither washed their hands nor used arm-length gloves before attempted correction of a difficult lambing. Antibiotic administration to the ewe after lambing is no substitute for such poor hygiene.

Action:

Always wash your hands in diluted antiseptic solution. Arm-length disposable plastic gloves are cheap and easily carried within pockets thus there can be no excuse for non-compliance with such basic hygiene even under extensive flock management systems (Fig 7).

Antibiotic therapy

All assisted lambings received an antibiotic injection on 33 of 95 farms while the majority of farmers (62; 65%) treated only ewes which became sick soon after the assisted lambing. This policy is likely to result in development of womb infections (metritis) and consequent poor milk production in those sheep not treated with antibiotics to



Fig 3: Ewe deaths in lowground flocks in the UK are often quoted as 5 to 7 per cent per annum with many losses associated with dystocia. This ewe had a ruptured uterus (see Fig 4)



Fig 4: Ruptured uterus caused by unskilled interference at lambing time.

prevent infection. This would be manifest as hungry lambs (Fig 5) and poor growth.

Action:

All assisted lambings must receive a course of antibiotics. Always follow the dose rate instructions (volume and duration of treatment). Do not stop treatment prematurely simply because the ewe seems better the following day.



Fig 5: Death may result several days after an assisted lambing from a severe womb infection



Fig 6: The success rate for caesarean operations undertaken on the farm typically exceeds 97 per cent.

Non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)

Many antibiotics are combined with non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) at little extra cost and reduce inflammation and pain.

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Fig 7: Arm-length disposable plastic gloves are cheap and must be used for all assisted lambings to help reduce uterine infection.



Fig 8: Caudal analgesia (epidural) is routinely used for most corrections/manipulations undertaken by veterinary surgeon while dealing with a lambing problem and prolapses.

Caudal (epidural) analgesia

Over the past 10 years there have been considerable advances in the provision of analgesia for obstetrical conditions with dramatic improvements in the well-being of the sheep. Caudal analgesia (epidural) is routinely used for most corrections/manipulations undertaken by veterinary surgeon while dealing with a lambing problem and prolapses. Blockage of the ewe's reflex abdominal contractions greatly assists corrections/manipulations of dystocia cases and blocks all pain with obvious animal welfare benefits.

Epidural anaesthesia is routinely used before replacing vaginal and uterine prolapses. Suspending the ewe by her hind legs to replace the prolapsed tissues, often containing the distended urinary bladder, is unacceptable.

Health Quiz

NADIS Health Bulletins are designed to improve farm income, animal health and welfare by promoting disease control and prevention. Discuss how health planning can improve the profitability of your farm with your veterinary surgeon. NADIS is supported by BPEX, EBLEX, HCC, QMS, Merial Animal Health and MLC.