

# Give sheep every chance of thriving



The first of a series of contributions on sheep matters from sheep vet **Richard Knight**



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While nothing with sheep management is set in stone, patterns of disease are seen, especially in the vulnerable post-lambing period. One of the major risks we see as vets is *Nematodirus battus*, which can affect lambs from a few weeks old. Symptoms are often few and far between, with sudden death being a common presenting sign. A common misconception is that lambs always scour with this condition, which is not the case. *Nematodirus* has also been found to increase the risk of lamb nephrosis as well. This kidney condition can present as a non-specific ill lamb which eventually dies, or a lamb found dead. A regular flock faecal egg count helps to detect the presence of *Nematodirus* eggs, and treatment is then usually advised based on this being found. Although tempting to treat with anthelmintics on a whim, this is not a wise use of medicines and doesn't help inform for either future



use or assessing response to treatment. Deaths in lambs are often best investigated, but this is tempered with the individual farmer's desire to react to problems at different levels, with some tolerating a higher level of deaths than others. It's my opinion that

no deaths should be the target. The involvement of a farm animal veterinarian early in the process is desirable.

Pound-for-pound, a nursing sheep can compete with a dairy cow for energy usage and the effort she is going to produce milk for her

lambs, so it's no surprise that these girls are then vulnerable to disease. With a relatively long time until they are bred again, there is usually plenty of time for the uterus and ovaries to get back into shape and good health, but the body can take some nourishing. A 75kg sheep feeding a single lamb from one to four weeks old requires 25MJ (megajoules) per day, which equates to 2kgDM (dry matter) of grass, or 10kg fresh weight of grass – that can take her a lot of finding, and is the most she can possibly eat! A 75kg ewe with twins at the same age requires 32.3MJ, an impossible task for her to attain from grass. Early lambing sheep (January/February), especially native breeds like mules, usually manage to carry condition well, as the good summer grass goes straight on their backs, as the lambs are weaned by then. The majority of the March and April lambers are working hard then and conditions like liver fluke, lameness and trace element deficiencies can become more apparent if she does not have good nutrition

to make her as resistant to these ailments as possible. Vaccines, too, require a healthy well-nourished sheep to work properly. If this doesn't happen, then treatment failures are apparent, assuming that the correct condition was identified and treated in the first place.

Obtaining a good history, therefore, when the wheels come off is vital, so that these hurdles can be overcome to give the sheep every chance of thriving again. It's a good chance to put some science back into sheep farming!

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