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REARING ORPHAN LAMBS

By L. C. SNOOK, Animal Nutrition Officer

Each autumn, inquiries are received concerning the rearing of orphan lambs. It is well known, of course, that lambs are successfully reared on hundreds of farms with the aid of cows' milk and a baby's bottle. In most cases the lambs seem to thrive despite irregular and haphazard feeding. One of my earliest boyhood memories is my concern at allowing a lamb to swallow the rubber teat off a feeding bottle. But even this indigestible addition to the diet apparently caused no harm and I was not required to make explanations.

Nevertheless, there are refinements in feeding which give the lambs a better chance and although a busy farmer or, as is generally the case, his wife, may not have the time to do everything "according to the book" it will do no harm to discuss the more idealistic ways of rearing orphan lambs.

Firstly, like all other newly-born animals, lambs benefit from the colostrum or "first milk" normally obtained in the first day or so of life. So if it is practicable, let the young orphan have a few feeds from a recently-lambed ewe (which will need to be forcibly restrained). Such a ewe normally will have more than enough milk for her own lamb. If it is not possible to provide any colostrum it is sometimes recommended that a teaspoonful of olive oil or castor oil be added to the milk given during the first day or so. Whether or not one is justified in inflicting a purgative on the young lamb is debatable. Certainly most lambs are reared without the use of these oils. Secondly, lambs must be kept warm and dry. No lamb can be expected to thrive if locked in cold damp outbuildings, which invariably seem to be dirty.

Bottle-fed lambs should receive warm fresh cow's milk through clean rubber nipples from clean bottles. Ewe's milk contains 7-8 per cent. butterfat, about double the amount in normal cow's milk. It follows that milk from a Jersey or Guernsey cow is to be preferred, or that cream should be added to the milk fed to young lambs.

Frequent small feeds are to be preferred for the first week, but it is realised that such recurrent attention is rarely possible on a farm. Theoretically, the newly-born lamb should be given only three or four tablespoonsful of milk every 4-6 hours and some endeavour should be made to approach this ideal during the first two days. As the lamb develops give it more food at longer intervals. Most orphan lambs tend to be overfed, particularly when on only two feeds daily. It is better to have the lambs somewhat hungry, than over-loaded with milk which they cannot digest.

If given the chance, lambs will begin eating appreciable amounts of solid food at two to three weeks of age. Give them access to tender young pasture and encourage them to eat a dry meal as early as possible. Equal parts of crushed wheat and dried buttermilk makes an excellent meal for lambs. Bran, pollard, meatmeal, and crushed oats can all be blended according to fancy to make an easily-digested supplement to the milk. At an early age lambs will also nibble at good quality hay and this habit also should be encouraged. Obviously the sooner the orphan eats solid food the more quickly it can be weaned. Clean drinking water is also essential; if the animal is to be weaned early it must be taught to drink plenty of water.

MILK SUBSTITUTES

On many wheatbelt farms, cows' milk is not nowadays abundant. Substitutes are therefore necessary. Dried buttermilk is ideal for this purpose, particularly as it contains 6-9 per cent. of butterfat. Dried buttermilk costs less than one shilling per pound in South-Western areas where it is used as a calf food, and produce merchants anywhere should be able to supply this easily-handled, easily-used milk substitute. If one pound of dried buttermilk is mixed with one gallon of water the resultant fluid can be used to replace whole milk.

Lambs will soon nibble at solid food if given an opportunity. This fortnight-old lamb at the Animal Health and Nutrition Laboratories is eating tree lucerne, cut as late summer feed for the ewes.

Intestinal disturbances can be a serious worry where lambs are being hand reared. These generally result from dirty feeding utensils, contaminated milk, or overfeeding.

It should be possible to begin weaning at about eight weeks of age. Gradually reduce the liquid being fed so that the lamb has to drink water and eat more and more of the dry meal offered as an alternative. If pasture and hay are also available the lamb will soon become quite independent of the bucket.
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