Meat production - Some impressions from the recent visit of Dr. John Hammond

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Dr. John Hammond, the eminent English authority on meat and meat production, commenced a two months' visit to Australia early in March, 1958, at the invitation of the Australian Meat Board. The object of this visit was to enquire into and make suggestions for the general improvement of our meat production in both quality and quantity. During his stay Dr. Hammond will visit the principal meat-producing areas of the Commonwealth.

Dr. Hammond commenced his itinerary by spending a week in this State. During that time he made a comprehensive tour of the meat-producing districts of the southern half of the agricultural areas and addressed groups of farmers at various centres including the Wokalup Research Station. In addition, conferences were held with research workers and with representatives of the meat trade.

As an example of what could be accomplished by the application of the results of research and improved husbandry practice, Dr. Hammond described the methods employed by the English farmer in making such a substantial increase in the home production of meat as has been accomplished since the commencement of World War II.

FERTILITY AND NUTRITION

Dr. Hammond stressed fertility and nutrition, with emphasis on the former, as being two very important factors for obtaining increased production.

With regard to fat lambs he considered it necessary to increase the fertility of our flocks, to the extent at least of obtaining a considerable percentage of twins. He pointed out that the rearing of twins resulted in a considerable reduction in the cost of rearing each lamb. At the same time it was obviously necessary for the ewe to be capable of providing sufficient milk for both lambs.

The inherent ability of the crossbred ewe to produce twins is almost wholly derived from its longwool ram sire, and
Dr. Hammond suggested that our stud-breeders could help to raise the fertility levels of our flocks by concentrating on producing these rams from animals which had the twinning tendency well-developed.

It is obvious that twin and triple births are essential to the English lamb-breeder. In this State however the necessity is not so pressing. We do not farm such high-priced land, nor are our pastures of such high carrying capacity. Also our ewes are not capable of the same level of milk production under present day conditions as the English fat lamb mothers. It is necessary for economic reasons to have half Merino blood in our crossbred ewes and the comparatively low level of milk production of the Merino limits the milking capacity of the crossbred.

That twins can usually be reared here more or less satisfactorily from crossbred ewes in a good season we already know. But for general application as a sheep-breeding policy it would appear necessary to improve the milking ability of those strains of the Merino which are suitable for mating to longwool rams for the production of crossbred mothers.

We require high-milking crossbred ewes and this character should be derived to the maximum from both sides of the breeding programme.

For the breeding of first-cross lambs i.e. using Merino mothers, twins are too often a liability and it is questionable whether—even with good management—it is sound practice to produce twins. At present farmers are concerned not so much in obtaining a high proportion of twins as in ensuring that all the ewes bear at least one lamb and that a high percentage of the lambs dropped survive to marketing. Neo-natal losses and subsequent deaths up to the time of sale or weaning are at the moment a serious limiting factor in flock production in this State.

There is evidence that this problem can be reduced to a reasonable level by improved flock management and the adoption of sound feeding and nutritional techniques both prior to, and after, lambing.

Dr. Hammond dealt with another aspect of fertility; that of increased lambing percentages through management of the ewe from well before mating until lambing time. He stressed the importance of keeping breeding ewes in lean store condition. Just prior to mating they should be “flushed” by putting them on better feed, or by supplementary rations, so that they tended to extrude more ova and give a higher percentage of twins.

In order to get the ewes sufficiently low in condition prior to mating, he suggested weaning all lambs at 10 to 12 weeks of age so that the ewes could be drafted off on to restricted grazing where they would not lay on fat as they would when sharing the good feed provided for the lambs.

This is a practice already followed by progressive farmers in this State and one that could well be adopted on a more general scale.

Mating, wherever possible, well into the breeding season was also recommended as a means of encouraging twinning.

The necessity for feeding the ewe well prior to lambing (“steaming up”) was stressed by Dr. Hammond as a means of producing a strong healthy lamb with a good survival potential and at the same time ensuring a high milk yield from the ewe.

Although Dr. Hammond emphasised the importance of “flushing” and its value is acknowledged with good flock management under our conditions at the present time, “steaming up” is a much more important aspect of husbandry for the breeding ewe. It is difficult to over-emphasise its importance.

Reference was made also to the English practice of mating ewe lambs at 8 to 10 months old. Providing they are well fed until two years old these ewes will develop satisfactorily although the initial lambing percentages will be somewhat lower than those of ewes mated at the normal age.

This practice is quite suited to our more favoured sheep districts and is in fact already being done by a number of farmers in the more southern lamb-producing areas. The principal advantage is that the breeding life of the ewe is extended, which is quite important economically.
With regard to the conformation of the mother, Dr. Hammond said that the English breeder was not very concerned about it. What he wanted in his ewes was high fertility and milk production. The ram put the required conformation into the lamb.

This is broadly the position in New Zealand also. In both cases the lamb is of wholly British breed and therefore carcass conformation potential is high. In Australia however the mother is half Merino and therefore suffers in conformation, compared with a straight British breed. Conformation is thus a factor to be considered in our production of quality lambs in addition to fertility and milking ability.

**BEEF PRODUCTION**

Dr. Hammond dealt at some length with the great development which has occurred in the commercial beef cattle industry of the United Kingdom. The establishment of artificial insemination centres has been largely instrumental in effecting this. High quality beef bulls are used at all centres to inseminate dairy cows which are not required for breeding herd replacements. Aberdeen Angus and Hereford bulls are used, as these breeds “colour mark” their calves and are then visibly beef type animals. The Aberdeen Angus cross is polled and has a black coat and the Hereford cross shows the white face. The principal dairy breed is the Dairy Shorthorn and hence it would not be possible to use Beef Shorthorn bulls on such cows in view of the inability to determine by appearance whether the calves were of pure dairy strain.

Beef type bulls are in use at the artificial insemination centre of the Wokalup Research Station for a similar purpose.

When discussing the export trade in beef to the United Kingdom, Dr. Hammond explained that the market, after its own home-killed beef, prefers chilled (not frozen) carcasses with the minimum of fat, and weighing preferably 550 to 650 lb. The Australian Meat Board is fostering the production of this type of animal in Australia to the extent of allowing a bounty of 5d. per lb. for all such carcasses exported to the United Kingdom.

This trade is not acceptable to producers here, as at present the local demand can absorb most of our beef at higher prices than are obtainable in England. However should the present rapid increase in beef production in our agricultural areas continue it is likely that an export trade could be developed to cope with surplus production as with our lambs. Such quality carcasses suitable to the chiller trade are already being produced here.
With regard to the time of calving for beef production, Dr. Hammond explained that the calves are dropped a month or so before the feed comes away. The cow does not milk as well under these conditions and the very young calf can cope with the supply. When the pastures develop the calf is big enough to cope with the flush of milk. In this way troubles to the cow arising from the surplus milk and to the calf due to digestive upsets are avoided.

This is already a recognised practice throughout our beef-breeding districts. Many breeders are finding it suitable to calve as early as February, particularly if the cows have a high milk yield.

Meat production has now become a very important aspect of our agricultural economy. Meat in increasing quantities is required primarily at home for our rising population but also for export for feeding the outside world and what is also important for the establishment of overseas credits. We require not "just meat," but good quality meat. The home market as well as the export trade is keen in its demand for quality carcasses.

At such a time in the development of our meat industry the visit of Dr. Hammond is most opportune and will be of very considerable benefit to Australia.