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HOW TO CARE FOR ORPHAN LAMBS

By S. M. DENNIS, B.V.Sc., Ph.D., Senior Veterinary Pathologist

WITH the current high price and shortage of sheep in W.A., farmers might consider the bother of artificially rearing orphan lambs more worthwhile than before.

However, the experience of those who have tried to rear lambs only to have them die at the end of the first week after apparently good progress, can be discouraging.

With refrigeration available on farms today, this difficulty can be overcome.

The important points in rearing lambs are protective antibodies, sterilisation of milk and utensils, avoiding overfeeding, and shelter.

Protective Antibodies

A lamb born normally and suckled by its mother, automatically receives protective antibodies at the start of its life.

Antibodies are protective substances which assist the new-born lamb to combat infections and diseases. Lambs normally receive antibodies from their ewes in the colostrum or first milk. The antibodies received protect the lamb until it starts to manufacture its own.

Colostrum differs from normal milk in that it is thicker, yellow in colour and rich in antibodies, vitamin A and protein. Its value and importance cannot be stressed too strongly.

Lambs which have received colostrum during the first or second day of life are always easier to rear then lambs which never received colostrum.

This matter of colostrum and antibodies is the most important factor in the successful rearing of orphan lambs.

Farm Serum Bank

Farmers have the means of supplying these essential antibodies to their orphan lambs, by establishing a simple “blood bank,” or more properly a serum bank, on their properties.

By “harvesting” the antibodies when a sheep is killed for rations, a supply can be kept ready for lambing time.

This is the procedure:

- When a sheep is killed for rations, collect the blood in a sterilised container (sterilised by boiling for 10 minutes) and allow the blood to stand at room temperature until it has clotted and the clot has contracted. (Up to 24 hours.)
- Carefully pour the serum—the clear, yellow fluid—into a sterilised jug.
- Dispense the collected serum into a number of sterilised 2 oz. screw-top jars, filling each to one-third.
- Store the jars in a deep-freeze or in the freezer compartment of a domestic refrigerator.

Blood serum collected in this way will last as long as two years if kept frozen all the time.

Each orphan lamb to be reared should be given the serum, which contains the protective antibodies, from one of the jars (approximately 20 cc). The serum
The dark area in the centre is part of the clotted blood. The rest of the fluid is the serum to be carefully decanted into a sterile 2 oz. jar for freezer storage.

should be injected under the skin in the neck or into an armpit. It is essential that the contents of each jar be thawed out at room temperature and not under hot or warm water as this form of heating will destroy all or most of the antibodies.

The establishment of a serum bank will increase the number of successful rearings considerably, providing the other important aspects of artificial rearing are properly carried out.

Overfeeding

It is important not to overfeed a lamb. To do so is not a kindness, it is the reverse, and it is better to underfeed than to overfeed.

During the first week of life a newborn lamb should be fed every three hours; thereafter every six hours.

While this is the ideal feeding routine it is time-consuming and bothersome to carry out for the whole 24 hours of the day. It is a matter for each person to organise depending upon his or her day. During the first few days lambs should receive 2 oz. of milk per feed and this should be slowly increased to 3 oz. to 4 oz. by the end of the first week. The principle of lamb feeding is to give little and often at regular intervals.

Milk

It is well known that the young of any species thrives best on the milk of its own kind. However cow’s milk is similar in composition to that of the ewe and is suitable for use, unchanged, for raising lambs. It is essential that the milk be fresh and warmed to body heat.

Sterility

Bottle-fed lambs are more susceptible to infection than at foot lambs and it is essential that the milk and utensils are sterilised by boiling. The bottle and the teat should be rinsed after feeding and always sterilised by boiling before use.

Shelter

It is important that orphan lambs being reared are housed in a warm shelter out of wind and rain as they appear to be more susceptible to temperature changes.

Complications

The complications most likely to occur are enteritis or diarrhoea, and pneumonia. Enteritis, which more commonly occurs, is usually the result of overfeeding, feeding milk at the incorrect temperature, contaminated milk or feeding from contaminated utensils. The incidence of enteritis can be reduced to a minimum by closely following the recommendations in this article. Using limewater (a teaspoonful per 3 oz. of milk) and vitamin supplements such as Penta-vite are additional means of preventing diarrhoea.
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