A sick ewe why? [pregnancy toxaemia]

F C. Wilkinson
A SICK EWE
WHY?

This dazed-looking ewe was seen wandering aimlessly around with an unsteady gait. Three other ewes had died after a similar sickness lasting about four days. Two more sheep in the flock of 350 ewes were also sick. One of them was down with its head on one side.

Three days before the first sickness the ewe flock had been yarded for drenching and vaccination. They had been left in the yards overnight then returned to a stubble paddock. The flock was due to start lambing in about three weeks time.

Tentative Diagnosis
Pregnancy toxaemia (twin lamb disease).

Post Mortem
The ewe stumbled and fell when approached. With the owner’s permission the ewe was killed and opened up. The most significant finding was an enlarged yellow ochre coloured liver. The breeding bag contained one very large lamb. Close examination of the abundant kidney fat revealed chalky white specks. These findings are typical of pregnancy toxaemia and helped confirm the diagnosis.

Cause
These fat ewes in advanced pregnancy had suffered a severe set-back in nutrition by being kept in yards for 24 hours. On top of this the stubble paddock to which they had been returned was very poor feed.

This led to insufficient carbohydrate being present in their diet, with a resultant fall in the blood glucose level below the minimum required for the brain. The consequent damage to the brain resulted in the nervous symptoms observed in the sick sheep.

Action
The two sick ewes were caught and given a drench of 6 oz. of glycerine mixed in an equal quantity of water; this drench was repeated next day. The ewe still standing at the start of treatment made a good recovery and produced normal lambs two weeks later, but the ewe which was down when treatment started died three days later despite further drenches with glycerine.

The rest of the flock was moved to a paddock containing plenty of clover burr, which they were accustomed to scavenging for. They were also given a ½ lb. of grain a day until lambing finished. Three more ewes became sick soon after being moved but responded to one dose of glycerine. The rest of the flock lambed normally.

— F. C. WILKINSON, Veterinary Surgeon
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For further advice consult your local Department of Agriculture Officer.

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