Alive-stiff-dead [tetanus]

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ALIVE-STIFF-DEAD

Only 12 hours before this photograph was taken the lamb pictured was alive and healthy. When examined it was very stiff and unable to stand. A few hours later it was dead.

Flock History

Exactly a week before, 525 lambs had been tailed from a flock of 600 ewes. The owner was justly proud as 80 per cent. marking was excellent for Merino flocks in his area.

Last year, three lambs which were 8 weeks old at marking, had apparently bled to death after tailing and castration for which a knife was used. To prevent similar deaths this year the owner had placed an elastrator ring on the tail of each of the larger lambs and then cut the tail off just below the ring.

When checked two days after marking no deaths had occurred but exactly 7 days after marking three lambs were found dead and another 10 were lying on the ground. The owner’s immediate thought was pulpy kidney disease as he had not given the lambs a routine vaccination at marking. As he lifted the sick lambs onto his utility he found they were all quite rigid. Could it be white muscle disease?

Back at his house he rang through to the Department of Agriculture’s Veterinary Surgeon. The veterinarian said he would come out that afternoon.

Examination

The visiting officer listened to the history as he drove out to the flock. The sheep all ran away from the approaching vehicle, but two lambs dropped behind. Both had stiff stilted gaits. He then examined the ten lambs previously picked up by the farmer, two of which had meanwhile died. The eight live lambs were lying on their sides with legs rigidly extended and head bent back. Their jaws appeared to be locked and could not be opened.

The two freshly dead lambs were post-mortemmed. They appeared normal except for the moist smelly area where the tail had been removed.

Of the ten lambs sick and dead, all except one were large lambs on which rings had been used.

Cause

The deaths were obviously due to tetanus. Tetanus spores had entered the cut area and started to multiply in the moist, dead tissue. The lambs with the rubber rings had a large area of dead tissue suitable for the growth of tetanus bacteria. The toxin formed by the tetanus germs had passed into the blood stream and finally reached the nervous system causing typical nervous symptoms preceding death.

Action

Tetanus antitoxin was purchased that day, and 1 cc. given as an injection under the skin of all unaffected lambs. At the same time rubber rings still present were removed. Two lambs with early symptoms of tetanus were also injected with antitoxin.

Result

All the lambs showing symptoms of tetanus died. Within 12 hours of being given the antitoxin two more lambs died, but no further deaths occurred.

Future Prevention

The owner has made a resolution to mark his lambs at an earlier age. Now he knows about tetanus he will take every precaution to prevent further losses by good hygiene and marking in temporary yards in the paddock. He intends to use the knife only and will examine the lamb flock daily for at least 14 days after marking. Should tetanus become an annual problem he has been advised to use tetanus antitoxin as a routine at marking.

— F. C. WILKINSON, Veterinary Surgeon

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