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TIP FOR CALVING AND LAMBING SEASON

It is coming up to the time of year when we see lots of newly born calves and lambs bouncing around the paddocks. While most calves and lambs make their way into the world without any problems, some will need help. There are a few ways you can help your cows and sheep to deliver healthy calves and lambs.

Nutrition is very important right through pregnancy – ideally cows and ewes are kept in good (not fat) body condition. Trying to back off the feed coming up to pregnancy to reduce calving or lambing problems will quite often make things worse. The reduced energy intake for the mother doesn't make the calf or lamb grow more slowly – it just means the mother has no energy to push the calf or lamb out during labour.

Other nutritional problems to watch out for around the time of calving or lambing include milk fever (low calcium), grass tetany (low magnesium) and pregnancy toxæmia (especially with twins). Ensuring that mothers are on good quality feed with sufficient legume content will minimise these problems.

Stage One of the birth process begins with the first contractions and ends when the foetus enters the birth canal. This stage normally lasts for less than 6 hours. Signs to watch for include the cow or ewe becoming restless (getting up and down a lot), going off on their own and the mucous "plug" being dislodged from the birth canal. If this stage lasts for more than 8 hours or if you see meconium (thick orange fluid) being released, it is time to call for veterinary help.

Stage Two begins when you see the water sac or bag and ends with delivery of the calf or lamb. Contractions start to come more quickly and the cow or ewe will usually lie down. There will be several big pushes interspersed with rests – first to deliver the head then the shoulders then the hips (when the cow or ewe may stand up again). This stage should not last for more than 4 hours. Please call for veterinary help if the calf or lamb appears to be coming in an odd position, if delivery is not progressing despite the cow or ewe straining, if you see blood from the rectum, if the presented head appears swollen or if there is meconium.

These are the stages when veterinary help is most likely to be required. The vast majority of delivery problems (90%) come down to oversized calves or lambs, so first time mothers are most at risk. Another 5% of problems are due to abnormal positioning of the foetus. Veterinary intervention may take many forms including use of drugs (such as epidurals and muscle relaxants), repositioning the calf or lamb and delivering the calf or lamb by traction (pulling). More complicated cases may require a caesarean section, or foetotomy if the calf or lamb is dead.

Physical problems associated with difficult deliveries include paralysis of the dam (especially if the calf or lamb is very large and/or has to be pulled) and uterine prolapses (again especially if the calf or lamb has to be pulled).

Stage Three starts with the delivery of the lamb or calf and ends when the foetal membranes (placenta) are passed, usually within 12 hours. If the membranes have not passed after three days or if the cow/ewe appears systemically ill, antibiotics or other treatment may be required.

Once the calf or lamb is delivered, make sure it is breathing well by sitting it up on its chest and poking some straw up its nose if necessary to stimulate breathing. Ensure that the calf or lamb gets a drink from the mother (within the first 12 hours) to get the all-important colostrum which primes their immune system. This may mean milking out the mother and bottle feeding the calf or lamb.

Like most emergencies, getting help earlier will increase the chances of a successful outcome so please call Cowra Veterinary Centre as soon as possible if you think you need help with your lambing or calving.

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