Out of Hours

The hidden hazards of spring: why pregnant women and the immunocompromised should avoid lambing

There are 41 000 sheep farms in the UK on which around 14 million ewes lamb between January and April. The majority of ewes lamb unaided, but around 5% require assistance where the lamb is not presenting with the forelegs first and head pointing forwards. In these sheep, the shepherd will attempt to correct the presentation by manipulating the head and limbs of the lamb in the birth canal to deliver it; very few require caesarean section by a veterinary surgeon.

Many people are familiar with the process of lambing through TV programmes such as Lambing Live and Countryfile, but doctors may be less aware of the hazards of lambing to anyone who is immunocompromised, especially to the shepherdess, whose smaller hands are often in demand to manipulate lambs in a tight pelvis.

Most lambing takes place in a shed with limited washing facilities and minimal to non-existent personal protection, exposing the shepherd to amniotic fluid and to dead and diseased fetuses. The UK sheep flock is endemically infected with toxoplasmosis (Toxoplasma gondii) (N Wheelhouse, personal communication, 2014) and enzootic abortion [EAE; caused by Chlamydiophila abortus, formerly known as C. psittaci].

EAE is introduced into a flock by infected replacements or carried on infected placetas by carrion birds flying between farms. It has a latent period, there is no current test for it, and ewes show no symptoms until 2 or 3 weeks before their lambs are due when weak or dead lambs are born prematurely. The lambs and birth fluids are heavily contaminated with Listeria monocytogenes, which can infect pregnant ewes and may be transmitted to women. Although the symptoms of those of a mild flu-like illness, the organism may cross the placenta and cause septicaemia, meningitis, and fetal death. There may be long-term consequences for babies who survive. There are up to 25 cases of listeria reported each year, although it is not clear how many of these are associated with lambing; and also pregnant women are advised to avoid dietary sources of listeria such as soft cheeses, prepared salads, and paté.

There are a number of other ovine diseases which pose a risk for pregnant women, including Coxiella burnetti, which causes Q fever, salmonella, Campylobacter, tick borne fever, and Border disease [also known as Hairy shader disease] caused by a flavivirus. Risks are not confined to lambing, but include assisting with calving or kidding, which should also be avoided when pregnant. Those at risk include not only farmers themselves, but also veterinary personnel and abattoir workers. The risks extend to handling live vaccines used to prevent these diseases.

Any woman who knows she is pregnant should avoid contact with livestock giving birth and should not handle or wash contaminated clothing and boots. She must avoid handling sick newborn animals, which should not be brought into the house. If anyone consults with a flu-like illness, the history should include exposure to livestock and zoonoses should be in the differential diagnosis of doctors practising in rural areas in the spring.

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DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X684121

REFERENCES


"Any woman who knows she is pregnant should avoid contact with livestock ..."

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