Mulesing lambs – avoiding fatalities and poor recovery

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Introduction
A number of producers have indicated fatalities and slow recovery of lambs after mulesing. This article outlines possible reasons for poor performance of lambs following mulesing and management to minimise the risks.

Is mulesing the cause of death?
Mulesing itself should not result in higher lamb death rates than marking alone, but there are several reasons why mulesing may cause death. The reason for significant numbers of lambs dying should be investigated, and the following list may help you identify the cause of lamb deaths. However, to accurately identify the cause of lamb deaths on a property a farm inspection and lamb post-mortem is generally required.

Does mulesing cause poor growth rates?
Expect lamb growth rates to be reduced during the 2 weeks following mulesing as wounds cause pain and stress. Research has shown that by 9 weeks after mulesing the growth rate of mulesed and unmulesed lambs should be the same. An exception could occur if lambs are under very poor nutrition. Significant attempts should be made to prevent or manage poor nutrition of lambs particularly if they are to be mulesed, to avoid deaths or poor growth.

Inadequate nutrition is the major cause of low growth rates in young lambs. Ewes and lambs should graze the best pasture available, with supplementary feeding if necessary.

Possible causes of deaths/poor recovery following mulesing
Infection; Flystrike; Poor nutrition; Mismothering.

Management to minimise risks
Optimum age:
- As soon as possible after 2 weeks of age and before 12 weeks of age. Younger lambs are likely to be mismothered, as well as being knocked around by larger lambs and ewes in the yards. As lambs age, the stress of mulesing becomes greater. Mulesing of lambs older than 6 months is illegal without anaesthetic.

Correct technique:
- The V mules is recommended (see Figure 1). Experience is needed to perform the operation well.

Reduce stress:
- Do not mules lambs until they have cooled down following mustering. Increased blood flow in stressed lambs leads to greater blood loss.
- Do you need to use dogs to pen up lambs? If a dog is not necessary, don't have one in the yards. There is no need to have 5 dogs all penning up one catching pen. If required, one should be able to do the job. Trampling and smothering of lambs is carelessness. There is no need to have dogs use excessive force on lambs. Handle lambs as quietly as possible.

Reduce disease risks:
- Lambs should be vaccinated (6-in-1) at mulesing/marking to reduce the risk of disease.
- Ideally mules lambs in temporary yards in the paddock to avoid the stress of long droving and soil-borne diseases which heavily contaminate main sheep yards. Ideally lambs should drop onto clean grass.
- Remove skin and tail pieces at the end of each day for burning or burial to avoid disease build-up on site
- Sterilise equipment before use and regularly dip in disinfectant while in use.
- Keep shears sharp to avoid bruising/accident
- Obviously lambs will be stiff and sore while mulesing cuts heal. However, stiffness associated with cuts should be healed within 3 weeks. Stiffness or lameness developing after mulesing may be due to tetanus, or bacterial arthritis where bacteria enter the joints via the bloodstream from the mulesing wound. If this occurs, it indicates that hygiene at mulesing was inadequate. Arthritis causes permanent lameness.

Reduce flystrike risk:
- Ideally mules when the fly risk is low. Otherwise, use wound dressings. Wound dressings can delay the healing process but are necessary if flies are expected. If there is any fly risk lambs need to be inspected regularly and treated if necessary for up to a month following mulesing.

Post-mulesing:
- Avoid handling or disturbing lambs for one month post-mulesing to allow wounds to heal, except where fly treatment is necessary.

Figure 1. Mules operation (Source: Bell 1991 *In*: Australian Sheep and Wool Handbook)