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Long-term effects of size and nutrition of the
pregnant ewe on mammogenesis and lactation
performance of offspring and growth of the grand
offspring

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Animal Science

at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand.

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Abstract

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Undernutrition of fetal sheep has resulted in conflicting reports on fetal mammary development. A cohort of such underfed offspring produced greater milk, lactose and crude protein yields at their first lactation, and their lambs grew faster to weaning, than offspring that ate *ad libitum*, but these effects were not repeated at their second lactation. This thesis reports continued studies of that cohort to examine potential fetal programming effects of maternal size and plane of nutrition during pregnancy on mammary gland development and subsequent lactational performance of the female offspring. Light (L) and heavy (H) twin-bearing dams (G0) were fed either *ad libitum* (A) or maintenance (M) nutritional regimens from day 21 until day 140 of pregnancy under pastoral grazing conditions. Fetal mammary glands from female offspring were collected at day 140 of gestation (H: n=16; L; n=19; A: n=17; M n=18) and were assessed by histological and imaging analysis, recording number and total area of ducts and the size, total area and total number of secretory cells. Milk yield and composition of ewe offspring (G1) were recorded weekly for the first six weeks of their third (n=52) and fourth (n=45) lactations. The birth weights and growth of the grand-offspring (G2) were also measured once weekly until the lambs were 42 days old.

Fetal offspring from A-dams had greater body weights (5.9 ± 0.1 kg vs. 5.2 ± 0.1 kg; $P < 0.01$) and tended to have heavier mammary glands at day 140 (14.9 ± 0.9 g vs. 13.0 ± 0.7 g; $P < 0.1$) compared to those from M-dams. There was a tendency for LA-fetuses to have a greater number of mammary ducts than all other treatment groups (LA: 5.8 ± 0.23 g vs. HA: 5.6 ± 0.23 g, HM: 5.4 ± 0.21 g, LM: 5.2 ± 0.21 g; $P < 0.1$). An interaction between nutritional treatment and rank, single (S) or twin (T), was found ($P < 0.05$) for mammary gland weight such that twin fetuses carried by M-dams had lighter mammary glands compared to all other nutrition by rank groups (TM: 10.66 ± 1.06^a ; SM: 15.24 ± 0.99^b ; TA: 14.87 ± 1.18^b ; SA: 15.08 ± 1.13^b , g; $P < 0.05$). Dam size had no significant effect on fetal mammary gland dimensions.

At the third lactation, there was an interaction ($P<0.01$) between dam size and nutrition such that LA-ewes had lower lactose percentages than HA-ewes and LM-ewes. Compared to H-ewes, L-ewes had higher milk fat percentages (6.3 vs. $6.8 \pm 0.13\%$ respectively; $P<0.05$) and yield (177.3 vs. 187.8 ± 3.8 g/day respectively; $P<0.05$) over the six-week trial period. There was a significant ($P<0.05$) effect of grand-dam size on grand-offspring weight during the third lactation, but not the fourth. During the third lactation, the lambs (G2) of H-ewes and A-ewes grew faster than G2 lambs from L-ewes and M-ewes, respectively (11.20 and 11.05 vs. 10.56 and 10.72 ± 0.17 kg respectively; $P<0.05$). At their fourth lactation, H-ewes had higher lactose percentage (5.39 vs. $5.32 \pm 0.02\%$, $P<0.05$), lactose yield (132.45 vs. 125.11 ± 2.4 g/day, $P<0.01$), and higher crude protein yield (126.08 vs. 119.54 ± 2.24 g/day, $P<0.05$) than L-ewes. There was no effect of G0 nutrition on G1 milk yield, milk fat or lactose and crude protein overall percentages or yields during the third and fourth lactations.

In summary, poor dam nutrition increased fetal mammary gland development but effects reported in the first lactation of the offspring were not repeated in the second to fourth lactations. Grand-dam nutrition also has inconsistent intergenerational influence when comparing the offspring's first, second and third parity. In the first parity, a grand-dam maintenance diet accelerated grand-offspring growth, whereas it inhibited grand-offspring growth for the second and third parities. Development of strategies to overcome constraints imposed by size and nutrition has the potential to enhance lamb growth and production by offspring, thereby increasing the profitability of the lamb-production enterprise.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Figures	xii
Chapter 1: A review of the development and function of the mammary gland and the role of fetal programming in sheep	2
Introduction	3
1.1 Mammary Gland Development.....	4
1.1.1 Overview	4
1.1.2 Pre-natal Mammary Development	6
1.1.3 Post-natal Mammogenesis	9
Stroma.....	9
Parenchyma	10
Post-natal Growth Patterns	11
1.1.4 Mammary Development during Pregnancy.....	12
1.1.5 Mammary gland development during lactation	12
1.1.6 Involution	13
1.1.7 Mammogenic Hormones	15
1.1.8 The Techniques Used to Measure Mammary Development	17
1.2 Lactation.....	19
1.2.1 Mammary Function.....	19
1.2.2 Milk composition	21
1.2.3 Lactogenic Hormones	24
1.2.4 Lamb Growth	25
1.3 Factors that influence the development of the mammary gland.....	26
1.3.1 The correlation between hormones and effects of nutrition.....	26
1.3.2 The effect of nutrition on growth, mammary gland development and lactation performance of the offspring.....	29
1.3.3 The effect of maternal size on offspring mammary gland development and production ..	32
1.4 Fetal programming of mammary gland development and lactation performance.....	35
1.4.1 Proposed mechanisms for the effects of dam size and nutrition	35

1.4.2	Fetal programming: The effect of maternal size and nutrition in the long term	39
1.5	Conclusion.....	39
Chapter 2:.....		42
The effect of dam size and nutrition during pregnancy on fetal mammary gland development		42
Abstract.....		43
Introduction		44
2.1	Materials and methods.....	46
2.1.1	Animals and treatments.....	46
2.1.2	Histology Samples	46
2.1.3	Morphological Measurements.....	47
2.1.4	Statistical analysis	52
2.2	Results.....	52
2.2.1	Effects of ewe size and nutrition on fetal mammary gland development	55
2.3	Discussion.....	56
2.3.1	Dam nutrition.....	56
2.3.2	Dam Size.....	59
2.4	Conclusion.....	59
Chapter 3:.....		61
The effect of dam size and nutrition during pregnancy on the third and fourth lactations of the offspring, and growth of the grand-offspring in sheep		61
Abstract.....		62
Introduction		63
3.1	Materials and Methods.....	64
3.1.1	Dams	64
3.1.2	Offspring in 2009 and 2010.....	66
3.1.3	Grand offspring in 2009 and 2010	68
3.1.4	Statistical analysis	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.2	Results.....	70
3.2.1	Effects of dam size and nutrition on lactational performance of offspring.....	71
	Third-lactation (2009)	71
	Fourth-lactation (2010).....	71
3.2.2	Effects of ewe size and nutrition on lamb weights	76

Live weight of the grand-offspring (2009)	76
Live weight of the grand-offspring (2010)	76
3.3 Discussion.....	81
3.3.1 Overview	81
3.3.2 Effect of dam size	81
3.3.3 Effect of dam nutrition.....	84
3.3.4 Effect of grand-dam size and nutrition on growth of the grand-offspring	85
3.3.5 The current evidence of fetal programming.....	86
3.3.6 Future research	87
3.4 Conclusion.....	88
 Chapter 4: Discussion.....	 89
References	95

List of Figures

Figure 1. 1 A comparison of the cellular composition within the mammary fat pad of two species, at different stages of development (A) Mammary fat pad from post-natal ewe before puberty (B) mammary fat pad from post-natal mouse during puberty (C) Ducts from post-natal ewe before puberty (D) Parenchyma of post-natal mouse where ducts (terminal end buds) are proliferating into fat pad Source: Hovey *et al.* (1999). 6

Figure 1. 2 Timeline of significant events of mammogenesis in fetal sheep. Adapted from Jenkinson (2003). 8

Figure 1. 3 Light scanned micrographs at x120 magnification showing the process of involution in sheep at (1) 2 days (2) 4 days (3) 7 days and (4) 30 days after weaning. Arrow indicates alveoli. Source: Tatarczuch *et al.* (1997). 14

Figure 1. 4 The major endocrine control of mammogenesis from the embryonic stage, to involution. Epidermal growth factor (EGF) stimulates ductal growth. Then, EGF and estrogen control the ductal growth during puberty. Progesterone and placental lactogens stimulate the proliferation of the alveoli during pregnancy, and possibly combine with prolactin to proliferate during lactation, in some species. The hormonal controls during involution remain to be discovered. Source: Hennighausen & Robinson (2001). 17

Figure 1. 5 Effect of parity on the shape of the lactation curve of lacta sheep. 21

Figure 1. 6 Factors affecting milk composition: Input comes from the farmer, their milking techniques, milk interval, stripping, shearing, breeding, hormones and medical treatment also the animal influences milk composition through the breed, age, parity, size, litter size and health. Source: Bencini & Pulina (1997). 23

Figure 1. 7 The linear relationship between the predicted lamb growth rate and ewe milk yields in the first 4 weeks for: single born and single reared (solid line); twin born and single reared (short-dashed line); and twin born and twin reared(long-dashed line). Source: Morgan *et al.* (2007). 26

Figure 1. 8 A diagrammatic representation of the connection, and dependence, between nutritional state, hormones and metabolism on the body's growth and development. Source: Fowden & Forhead (2004). 28

Figure 1. 9 A graph of the mismatch hypothesis, showing the relationship between the *in-utero* environment and the post-natal/adult environment. The epigenetic mechanisms modify genes *in-utero* to produce phenotypes that will best prepare the fetus for the predicted future environment. The gray area indicates the post-natal environment matching the *in-utero* environment, optimizing the potential survival and 'fitness' of the offspring; outside the gray area implies that the offspring is prepared for the wrong environment and the resultant phenotype is detrimental to offspring growth and development. Source: Gluckman *et al.* (2007). 38

Figure 2. 1 Image of a fetal mammary gland at d140 displaying the method to count the number of ducts and measure their size 49

Figure 2. 2 Image of a duct from a fetal mammary gland at d140 displaying the method to count the epithelial cells. The total duct area was measured (outlined in yellow), then the area of the lumen was subtracted (white area within yellow perimeter). The number of cells within the yellow perimeter was counted. 50

Figure 2. 3 Image of a duct from a fetal mammary gland at d140 displaying the method to count the epithelial cells when the lumen was larger than the field of view. The secretory cell area was measured, and the number of cells was counted within the measured area. 51

Figure 3. 1. A diagram of the experimental design, dam (G0) size and nutritional treatments were implemented in 2005. After that, the offspring (G1) were kept together on an *ad libitum* diet. 65

Figure 3.2. A diagram of the udder (lateral and posterior views) and the technique used to measure udder dimensions. Dimension A was the posterior edge to the anterior edge along the midline. Dimension B was the distance between the left to right lateral margins, and dimension C was the distance from the top margin to bottom, parallel to the midline. 67

Figure 3. 3. Milk yield of offspring (G1) for the first 42 days in the third lactation (A: n=25), and fourth lactation (C: n=20), G1 were born to dams (G0) fed *ad libitum* or maintenance (n=29) (n=25) from d21 to d140 of pregnancy and G1 born to heavy (B: n=29) (D: n= 21), or light (n=25) (n=24) dams. Data are presented as least square means (\pm SEM) * P<0.05 indicates significance obtained by univariate analysis. Repeated measures MANOVA showed no significant effects of maternal size or nutrition over the lactation period. 70

Figure 3.4. Crude protein of ewe offspring (G1), in the first 42 days, that were born to dams (G0) fed *ad libitum* in the third lactation (A: n=25), and fourth lactation (C: n=20) or maintenance (n=29) (n=25) from d21 to d140 of pregnancy, and ewes born to heavy (B: n=29) (D: n= 21), or light (n=25) (n=24) dams. There were no significant effects of maternal size or nutrition on crude protein percentages in the third or fourth lactations. In the fourth lactation the offspring from heavy dams had greater (p=0.03) crude protein yields. Data are presented as least square means (\pm SEM). † P < 0.10 * P<0.05 71

Figure 3.5. Milk lactose percentage of ewe offspring (G1) in the first 42 days of their third-lactation (A) born to heavy (H) or light (L) dams fed either maintenance (M) or *ad libitum* (A) during pregnancy. HA-ewes (n=14) had greater (P<0.05) lactose % than LA-ewes (n=11), and LM-ewes (n=14); had greater (P<0.05) lactose % than LA-ewes. HM-ewes (n=15) were not significantly different than any other group. Data are presented as least square means (\pm SEM). † P < 0.10 * P<0.05 indicate significance obtained by univariate analysis. 72

Figure 3.6. Milkfat percentage of ewe offspring (G1) in the first 42 days, that were born to dams (G0) fed *ad libitum* in their third lactation (A: n=25), and fourth lactation (C: n=20) or maintenance (n=29) (n=25) from d21 to d140 of pregnancy and ewes born to heavy (B: n=29) (D: n= 21), or light (n=25) (n=24) dams. In the third lactation there were no significant effects of maternal nutrition, but offspring from light dams had greater (P < 0.05) milkfat than offspring from heavy dams. In the fourth lactation there were no significant effects of maternal size or nutrition. Data are presented as least square means (\pm SEM). † P < 0.10 * P<0.05 indicate significance obtained by univariate analysis 73

Figure 3.7. Lactose yield (A) and percentage (B) of ewe offspring (G1) in the first 42 days of their fourth-lactation (A), born to heavy (n= 21), or light (n=24) dams. The offspring from heavy dams produced greater (P<0.05) lactose yields than the offspring from light dams. Data are presented as least square means (\pm SEM). †P< 0.10 * P<0.05 indicates significance obtained by univariate analysis. 74

Figure 3.8. Lamb weight in 2009 (A,B) and 2010 (C,D) from birth weight until day 42 (A) for lambs (G2) whose grand-dams (G0) were fed *ad libitum* (n=40) or maintenance (n=50) from d21 to d140 of pregnancy, and (B) whose grand-dams were heavy (n=21), or light (n=24). Offspring from *ad libitum* or heavy dams produced lambs with greater (P<0.05) growth rates compared to offspring from maintenance-fed or light dams, respectively in 2009. There were no effects of grand-dam size or nutrition on lamb growth in 2010. Data are presented as least square means (\pm SEM). † P< 0.10 * P<0.05 indicates significance obtained by univariate analysis. 77

Figure 3.9. The linear relationship (P>0.10) between lamb (G2) body weight and milk yield of the ewe (G1) during the third lactation in 2009 (A) and fourth lactation in 2010 (B). Grand-dams (G0) were fed *ad libitum* (n=40) or maintenance (n=50) from d21 to d140 of pregnancy. 78

