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**APPLICATION OF INTRARUMINAL CHROMIUM
CONTROLLED RELEASE CAPSULES TO THE
MEASUREMENT OF HERBAGE INTAKE OF SHEEP AT PASTURE**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Animal Science
at Massey University**

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1990

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ABSTRACT

Experimental evidence obtained since 1950 suggests that New Zealand sheep farm production and financial returns could be increased by adopting separate grazing management for ewes of different pregnancy and rearing status from 6 weeks before lambing until weaning. Progress in developing management systems for the differential allocation of pasture, favourable lambing paddocks and labour during this period has been restricted by the absence of equipment for diagnosing ewe pregnancy status and a lack of data relating pasture conditions to feed intake and ewe and lamb productivity. Accurate pregnancy diagnosis by realtime ultrasound scanning has been available to farmers since 1985, but research into ewe grazing management continues to be hampered by the absence of techniques for measuring feed intake. This thesis addressed the latter issue, first by validating controlled release capsule (CRC) technology for measuring feed intake and second by examining feed intakes of ewes differing in pregnancy and rearing status and relating intakes to productivity.

A series of 11 experiments were conducted with sheep CRC to validate this technology for measurement of intake and to develop appropriate systems for using the technology in experimental situations. These studies examined: the linearity and period of Cr_2O_3 release; the effect of presence of capsules in the rumen on voluntary feed intake; the effect of feed type and feeding level on Cr_2O_3 release rate; and the accuracy of faecal Cr_2O_3 concentration in predicting faecal output of sheep dosed with CRC when alternative sampling regimens were applied. These experiments, conducted under both indoor feeding and outdoor grazing conditions, established that CRC released Cr_2O_3 into the rumen in a uniform manner once initiation of matrix extrusion had been completed 2 to 3 days after capsule insertion. The subsequent period of linear release (25 to 100 days) was found to be primarily dependent upon characteristics of the capsules controlled at manufacture (i.e. orifice diameter, matrix composition and length of pressed tablet matrix core). In comparison, environmental factors, both within and outside the sheep, had relatively small effects on the rate or linearity of Cr_2O_3 release. Release rate decreased by c. 4% if daily feed intake was at 0.7 maintenance compared to an ad libitum level, increased by c. 2% if hay rather than fresh pasture was consumed and decreased by 10 to 13% if capsules were placed in rumen-fistulated sheep rather than in intact animals. Adoption of feeding level below 0.6 maintenance for 4 to 7 days reduced Cr_2O_3 release rate and could cause capsule failure. Between-capsule variation in release rate from CRC recovered from the rumen by slaughter was low (coefficient of variation 2.0 to 6.5%). Variation between capsules within sheep was usually lower still. Voluntary herbage intake was significantly reduced if sheep were dosed with prototype CRC with inflexible wing designs. Under indoor conditions, correlations of 0.90 to 0.99 between daily faecal output derived by Cr_2O_3 dilution and actual faecal output for individual sheep were obtained. The correlation between estimates of mean 3-day faecal output of sheep at pasture predicted from the Cr_2O_3 concentration in morning and evening grab samples and from total collections was 0.87.

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Prediction of individual animal intakes (indoors) appeared less accurate ($r=0.74$) because of variation in capsule release rate and in the animal's own ability to select and digest its diet. Group mean estimates, which are appropriate for practical grazing conditions, were usually within $\pm 10\%$ of the actual value. Low diurnal variation in faecal Cr_2O_3 concentration (non-significant) allowed flexible faecal sampling regimens to be applied. In summary CRC were demonstrated to be superior to existing feed intake measurement techniques and to be well suited to the estimation of mean intakes of sheep, provided that suitable faecal sampling regimens were applied.

A pilot study investigating the feed intakes and productivity of ewes of different pregnancy and rearing status indicated that intakes of twin-bearing ewes were reduced in comparison to those of single-bearing ewes during late pregnancy, when the two groups were grazed together under "commercial" farming conditions. During lactation, intakes exhibited a curvilinear relationship with time and were generally higher (by up to 32%) in twin-rearing ewes than in single-rearing ewes. This pattern of feed intake was less clear in a subsequent nine-week lactation study. In that trial, experimental groups comprising equal numbers of ewes rearing single or twin lambs were continuously grazed on five different pastures maintained at fixed sward surface heights (2.5, 4.0, 6.0, 7.0 and 9.0 cm). Herbage intakes by both single- and twin-rearing ewes were maximised at a sward surface height of approximately 5.0 cm (1000 to 1100 kg dry matter/ha). Lamb growth rates were not affected by sward height during the first six weeks of lactation because the ewes mobilised body reserves to maintain milk production. All ewes lost liveweight during the first 6 weeks of lactation but only the ewes on the 2.5 cm sward failed to regain lost liveweight from weeks 6 to 9 of lactation. Wool production, strength and colour were not affected by sward conditions in either the ewes or lambs over the lactation period. These results suggest that New Zealand farmers would gain little benefit from differential management of ewes post-lambing where a minimum grazing height of 5.0 cm could be maintained provided that ewes were in good condition (i.e. minimum condition score 3.0) at lambing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study programme was expertly supervised by Professor Stuart McCutcheon and Professor George Wickham of the Animal Science Department at Massey University. I am particularly grateful for their enthusiastic support, prompt and constructive marking of manuscripts and assistance with field trials. It has provided a model for student postgraduate supervision which I will attempt to apply to students under my care in the future.

I was fortunate to have excellent technical support from Ms Catriona Jenkinson for all but two experiments. Catriona cheerfully helped to record data during weekends and willingly worked through the difficult weather conditions encountered during some of the field trials. (We will not forget the cold wet spring of 1988). Mrs Sally Kannegeiter assisted with the first two experiments. Dr Hu Gao and Dr Malcolm Tait, visiting scientists from the People's Republic of China and Canada respectively, provided considerable help with field measurements during the final grazing trial.

Mr Barry Parlane provided excellent service and assisted with the running of the indoor experiments at the Animal Physiology Unit. Mr Phil Whitehead (Manager of the Sheep and Beef Cattle Research Unit) and farm staff, Messrs Lloyd Williams and Kerry Kilmister and Miss Lynley Watt prepared and assisted with the management of livestock used for experiments. Staff of the Nutrition and Reproduction Laboratories were always helpful, and I especially thank Mrs Barbara Purchas and Mrs Kathy Morton for carefully completing the tedious task of digesting hundreds of faecal samples for chromium analysis. The atomic absorption spectrophotometer for measuring chromium was skillfully operated by Mr Rod McKenzie.

Dr Dorian Garrick's guidance with statistical analyses was much appreciated. Many helpful suggestions with respect to trial design and interpretation of results were provided by members of the Departments of Animal Science, Agronomy and Biochemistry.

Miss Christine Andricksen patiently typed most of the manuscript, with assistance from Mrs Denise Stewart and Mrs Kathy Hamilton. Graphs were prepared by Miss Yvette Cottam.

I have achieved each of the goals I set myself at the commencement of this study: to maintain my family and church responsibilities; to continue my normal teaching requirements; and to enjoy the PhD study programme. It was not always easy and I am particularly grateful to Vivienne, my wife, for her loyal support during the last four years. Without her help this thesis would never have eventuated.

Financial support for this research programme was provided by the C. Alma Baker Trust, the Vernon Wiley Trust, Captec (NZ) Limited, The Massey University Agricultural Research Foundation and the Massey University Research Fund.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| AA | atomic absorption spectrophotometer |
| ANOVA | analysis of variance |
| c. | circa (approximately) |
| CIDR | controlled internal drug release device |
| Cr | chromium (III) |
| Cr ₂ O ₃ | chromium sesquioxide |
| CRC | controlled release capsule |
| CS | condition score |
| CSIRO | Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation |
| cv. | cultivar |
| d | day |
| DM | dry matter |
| DMD | dry matter digestibility |
| DMI | dry matter intake |
| DOMD | digestible organic matter in the dry matter (D-value) |
| DOMI | digestible organic matter intake |
| DSIR | Division Scientific and Industrial Research |
| EPM | Ellinbank pasture meter |
| F.O.B. | free on board |
| h | hours |
| ha | hectare |
| HFRO | Hill Farming Research Organisation (Scotland) |
| ICPES | Industively coupled plasma emission spectrophotometry |
| L | lactation |
| M | maintenance |
| MA | mixed age |
| min. | minute |
| MJME | megajoules of metabolisable energy |
| NHA | net herbage accumulation |
| NA | not applicable |
| N/ktex | Newtons per kilotex |
| OM | organic matter |
| OMD | organic matter digestibility |
| OMI | organic matter intake |
| P | pregnancy |
| RDM | residual dry matter |
| RH | relative humidity |
| RMT | rumen mean retention time |
| X | tristimulus value (red) |
| Y | tristimulus value (green) |
| Z | tristimulus value (blue) |

Weights, volumes and measures

| | |
|----|--------------------|
| μg | microgram |
| mg | milligram |
| g | gram |
| kg | kilogram |
| ml | millilitre |
| nm | nanometre |
| μm | micrometre |
| mm | millimetre |
| km | kilometre |
| mA | milliamp |
| °C | degrees centigrade |

Statistical terms

| | |
|-----------|-----------------------------|
| CV | coefficient of variation |
| df | degrees of freedom |
| n | number |
| r | correlation |
| RSD | residual standard deviation |
| SD(s) | standard deviation |
| sem | standard error of the mean |
| TSS | total sum of squares |
| var | variance |
| \bar{x} | mean |
| NS | not significant |
| + | significant at $P < 0.1$ |
| * | significant at $P < 0.05$ |
| ** | significant at $P < 0.01$ |
| *** | significant at $P < 0.001$ |