



Animal Health & Welfare NI

## Sheep Health

### January Sheep Health

#### AHWNI Flock Health Focus: Analysing Scanning Performance: Could Iceberg Diseases Be Affecting Fertility in Your Flock?

Scanning can be an apprehensive time for farmers- the results will determine what kind of a lambing season you will have and show how your flock is performing. Every system is different and will have different goals, however, getting a lower lamb crop than expected can be disappointing and will result in less lambs available to sell- with lower productivity and profitability per ewe. AHWNI suggests a logical approach to investigation.

When scanning results come back with a lower than expected pregnancy rate, naturally the first look is to management:

- Were sheep flushed at tupping time?
- Were ewes too thin or too fat? Body Condition Score at weaning and tupping is important to take note of.
- Was lameness an issue in ewes or ram/s?
- Could they be low on minerals?
- Were there ram issues?- infertile/subfertile, inappropriate ram:ewe ratio, injuries
- Was the breeding period too short?
- Are there high parasite burdens? (check for fluke)
- Were there any other stressors?- e.g. poor weather, limited forage supply, handling, mixing groups

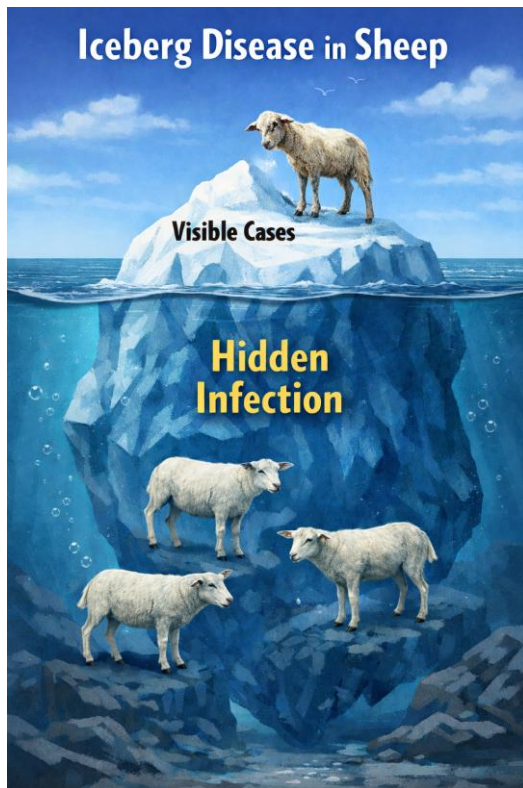
These are all very relevant questions and management must be reviewed, however, in some situations after review management may not appear to be the issue. It may be easy to dismiss this as 'just one of those things', everyone has bad years don't they? While it's not good to jump to conclusions about a high empty rate, given that poor fertility can have multi-factorial causes, after eliminating the risk of common infectious diseases, issues with the ram, deficiencies and stressful situations, there could be a hidden issue in the form of an 'iceberg disease', which if left undetected will cause further issues within the flock. To work your way through these situations, AHWNI advise to test and not to guess.

#### **What Is An Iceberg Disease?**

An iceberg disease is a disease in sheep that often has slow-to-show clinical symptoms. These symptoms can be difficult to differentiate from other endemic diseases and only a small proportion of the infected population may be noticed, therefore these diseases can persist within flocks for years undetected if not tested for. These diseases are incurable, and will lead to fatalities in sheep showing clinical signs.

Iceberg diseases can impact flocks mostly at a subclinical level- reducing fertility, milk production, weight gains of lambs and causing chronic weight loss. There are 5 iceberg diseases of significant concern affecting NI: Ovine Johne's disease (OJD), Maedi Visna

(MV), Border disease (BD), Caseous lymphadenitis (CLA) and ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma (OPA).



### **How Can Iceberg Diseases Affect Scanning Rates?**

Iceberg diseases affect fertility either directly, by interfering with early pregnancy, or indirectly by reducing body condition, appetite and overall ewe health at tupping.

Border Disease has a direct impact on fertility, causing early embryonic death, foetal reabsorption, abortions and stillbirths. A high barren rate is usually an indicator of this. The remaining four generally cause poor conception rates (lower lamb crops) due to chronic ill thrift and reduced appetite.

### **What To Do If You Suspect An Iceberg Disease**

- Review management to rule out all other possibilities
- Consult your vet
- Test empty and thin ewes as well as rams: blood tests are useful to diagnose Maedi Visna (MV), Border Disease (BD), Caseous lymphadenitis (CLA) and Ovine Johne's disease (OJD), faecal samples can be more accurate for early cases of OJD. There are no reliable blood tests for Ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma (OPA), diagnosis either relies on post mortem examination or ultrasound scanning can be used to detect early lung tumours.

- If any results come back as positive for an iceberg disease, while costly, it may be useful to do a whole flock test, allowing the prompt removal of any infected sheep and leading to eventual eradication from the flock

Further information on clinical signs, diagnosis, prevention and control of the five iceberg diseases is available on the AHWNI website under 'Sheep Health'. If you believe there is a risk that disease is in your flock, contact your vet, they may be aware of iceberg diseases diagnosed in your local area and can advise on what to test for, as well as providing advice following up on test results.