

**What is OJD?** OJD is a wasting disease caused by the sheep strain of the bacterium *Mycobacterium paratuberculosis*, which grows mainly in the small intestine. The intestinal wall slowly thickens and the animal has increasing trouble absorbing nutrients from its food. OJD has a long period after the bacteria enters a property before sheep become ill, usually more than 2 years, but eventually a number of infected animals will develop obvious signs of the disease; they start to rapidly lose condition and usually die within the next 3 to 6 months. Scouring may occur but is not seen routinely. Merinos are more susceptible than crossbreds and British breed sheep. Goats, deer and other species can be infected to varying degrees.

**There is no cure for sheep with OJD.**

**How does it spread on farm?** The OJD bacteria are shed in huge numbers in the faeces. Animals pick up the infection from contaminated teats, pasture and water. The bacteria can survive for many months in shaded environments.

**How does it spread between farms?** Bought-in sheep and strays are the main risk. Sheep droppings and contaminated run-off can also spread the infection between farms.



*A sheep showing signs of OJD.*

**Why do we worry about OJD?** In Australia, death rates around 10% per annum are common if OJD is not managed. Recent NZ research has reported losses of 17% of weaner weight and 10% of wool cut in sub-clinical cases in crossbreds. Once it gets into an area all flocks are at risk. The earlier you act, the less will be the impact of OJD on your business. Assuring sheep buyers about the OJD status of your sheep is becoming the norm.

Currently in the New England there is one known infected flock. As a result, death rates and production loss due to OJD across the local sheep industry has not been a concern. Vaccination is an effective way of reducing deaths due to OJD but must be kept up in the flock forever as vaccinated sheep continue to shed the bacteria onto the pasture and non vaccinated sheep rapidly become affected.

Gudair vaccine must also be used with care. Accidental vaccinating of the operator can cause a severe reaction resulting in severe tissue damage and the risk of permanent injury.



This injury is the result of accidental injection into the end of the finger, which had to be surgically repaired with amputation.

### **What has the local sheep industry done about OJD?**

In 2004 local sheep producers voted overwhelmingly to implement a regional biosecurity area for OJD. The biosecurity area was called an “Exclusion Area”.

To administer this exclusion area a management plan was written and a management committee established.

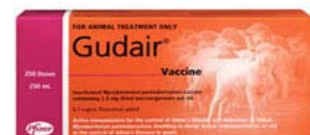
The objective of the exclusion area has been to minimise the impact of OJD by preventing entry of the disease and managing any disease events.

Strategies to achieve this objective have been

- Educating the sheep industry of the principles of risk based trading and OJD.
- Helping producers and agents understand National Sheep Health Statements (NSHS).
- Ongoing awareness and education.
- Assessing the OJD risk of sheep introductions.
- Investigating abattoir surveillance tracebacks.
- Representing the interests of the exclusion area in state and interstate forums.

### **What benefits are there in having an Exclusion Area?**

One of the first actions of the Northern OJD Exclusion Area Management Committee was to approach QLD DPI and Agforce to outline the objectives and strategies the EA would employ to reduce the risk of OJD being introduced. As a result of this QLD DPI accepts homebred sheep from the EA with one less ABC point than other areas.



Abattoir and NLIS mob based database information is scrutinised to detect lines of sheep suspected of having OJD. These are investigated to assist the individuals involved and minimise the potential impact on other producers in the authority.

The EA has assisted in reducing the spread of OJD into the New England LHPA. As a result of this the local sheep industry has not had to take up Gudair vaccination to manage the production losses associated with OJD. Gudair costs around \$2.00 per dose and all sheep on infected properties need to be vaccinated once. The cost savings to the local sheep industry from vaccine costs alone are estimated at **\$3 million annually**.

**Why are we having another survey?** To remain an exclusion area the Northern OJD EA Management committee is required to demonstrate ongoing sheep industry support for the EA every 3 years. We are required to do this in 2011.

**Who sets the OJD Policy?** OJD is managed as part of a national program, which is coordinated by Animal Health Australia and was set up to ensure the response to OJD by different states and industries continues to protect Australia's favourable OJD status and reduce the impact of disease. They coordinate some key areas of OJD management.

1. Prevalence area determination
2. Points allocation for assessing risk of introducing OJD
3. Abattoir monitoring
4. Research and development
5. Program evaluation.

**What are National Sheep Health Statements?** The national sheep health statement (NSHS) provides the key information to assessing the risk of introducing OJD when you purchase sheep. **They are compulsory.** All sheep being sold in NSW must be accompanied by a NSHS and be available for you to read prior to purchase.

As well as providing information on the OJD status of the sheep it includes information in relation to drenches, vaccinations, footrot and lice.

To assess the risk of OJD the document has Assurance Based Credit (ABC) points, whereby the greater the number of points the less likely you are to introduce OJD.

Points are allocated according to

1. Area where the sheep are from
2. Testing
3. Vaccination

The history of the consignment of sheep and whether they are home bred or mixed with higher risk sheep can also be determined.

Purchasers of sheep must retain a copy of the NSHS for 2 years.

If the consignment sheep were not bred on the property from which they were consigned, you need to check carefully on their history to understand any risk they may pose. **The more you know about the consignment sheep, the better you are able to determine whether or not they are a good investment, not just for you, but also for your neighbours and your local district.**

For more information please contact your local LHPA district veterinarian or ranger.