



Unlocking the keys to ewe survival

Post-mortem examination protocol

This post-mortem protocol has been provided to assist veterinarians conduct thorough periparturient ewe postmortem examinations. It will outline a process to achieve a gross post-mortem diagnosis. Additional tests may be needed to reach a conclusive diagnosis (e.g. aqueous humour biochemistry, tissue histology and culture).

This protocol has been adapted from the method used in the *Unlocking the keys to ewe survival* MLA funded project (L.LSM.0019). It was developed for the ewe survival research team vets to ensure consistency in approach, and for detailed follow up of post-mortem cases if required during data analysis. It may be more detailed in some areas than required for periparturient ewe post-mortem, however this enables vets following the protocol to adapt it for their own needs. The research team have agreed to make available the project methodology as a useful resource for wider use by animal health professionals.



There is a risk of exposure to zoonotic disease when conducting post mortems, especially on pregnant ewes. Appropriate PPE and good hygiene are essential.

General information	
Date / / Property name	
PIC Paddo	ck name/Mob ID
Manager name Manag	ger contact phone
Attending vet name Vet co	ntact phone
# Animal/ewe ID	
Ewe ID VID (if present on tag)	
Ewe ID NLIS tag colour	
Pink Black White Orange Light green Purple Other – please state colour of tag	Yellow Red Sky blue
Ewe litter size	Stage of pregnancy Lactation/post-partum duration
1 2 2+ (if triplets not differentiated through scanning) 3 Unknown	Days Days
External examination	
	stimated date/time of death (if known)
Fresh Moderate autolysis Advanced autolysis	istimated date/time of death (if known)
Fresh Moderate autolysis Advanced autolysis	
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Fresh Moderate autolysis Advanced autolysis Environment – brief Death circumstances Ewe was found dead Ewe was euthanised – describe method of euthated autolysis Ewe moved from position found Yes No	I fence, in a ditch)
Fresh Moderate autolysis Advanced autolysis Environment – brief Death circumstances Ewe was found dead Ewe was euthanised – describe method of euthated Ewe moved from position found Yes No Brief description of where ewe was found (e.g. middle of paddock, under tree, stuck in the stuc	I fence, in a ditch)

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Environment - brief (continued)

Describe any important paddock observations (e.g. potentially toxic plant species, weeds, blue green algae etc.)
Estimate of feed on offer (kg DM/ha) in paddock where ewe was found
ls supplementary feed on offer
Yes – describe supplementary feed ration (kg/hd/week and feed type e.g. 3.5kg/ewe/wk barley)
Additional observations (e.g. any relevant management practices including shearing, vaccination, drenching etc.)
🕦 External pathology exam – general
Supply photograph of external carcass with visible ewe ID for reference
Ewe body condition score
1 1.25 1.5 1.75 2 2.25 2.5 3 3.25 3.5 3.75 4 4.25 4.5 4.75 5
2 Describe any external predation including predator species, before or after death (Indicate on carcass, location of external predation)

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External pathology exam – general (continued)

Describe any signs of struggle or prolonged recumbancy (e.g. paddle marks on ground where found, unilateral periorbital swelling on down side)

Discolored mucosa
Yes – describe (e.g. jaundice, pallor, injected, etc.) No
Dentition
No adult teeth 2 tooth 4 tooth 6 tooth Full mouth Broken mouth
Lesion on skin/subcutis
Yes – describe (e.g. petechial haemorrhage, echymotic haemorrhage, trauma)
Joints
Normal Unable to access
Abnormal – describe (e.g. joint abnormality, including joints affected)
8 Feet
Normal
Abnormal – what is the most likely foot abnormality (check all applicable)
Toe abscess Heal abscess Foot rot Other – describe
Any other general external observations including pelvic or spinal trauma
Yes – describe (e.g. spinal trauma or pelvic trauma. If either of these are present, describe location and extent of issue)
Tes – describe (e.g. spinal trauma or peixic trauma. Il eluter ol trese are present, describe location and extent ol issue)
Any other comments

😕 External pathology exam – repro

Signs of mastitis
Yes – describe No
Obvious dystocia (e.g. part of lamb protruding)
Yes – describe (e.g. head swollen, tail, 2x feet)
Perineal trauma, including vulva and vestibule
Yes – describe extent and location of trauma
Discharge from vulva (NB – lochia (dark odourless, persists up to 3 weeks post-partum))
Yes – describe nature of discharge (e.g. bloody, mucopurulent, odourless or, malodorous, serous etc.) No
Prolapse (NB – rectal or vaginal prolapse may occur post-mortem with normal gas distension of abdominal viscera)
Yes – describe (e.g. vaginal, uterine, rectal, etc.)
Other external reproductive observations



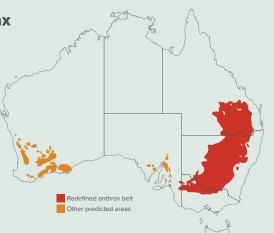
Before opening carcase – could anthrax be a potential differential?

Consider clinical presentation, property location, history of anthrax on the property, recent livestock movements, etc.

If anthrax is suspected, STOP and contact your district veterinary officer, the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline and your state government's biosecurity body where available. If suspicious, err on the side of caution.

Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline – 1800 675 888

QLD: Biosecurity Queensland – 13 25 23 NSW: DPI Biosecurity - 1800 680 244 TAS: Emergency Animal Disease - 03 6165 3777 NT: Biosecurity Hotline - 1800 084 881 All other states/territories: 1800 675 888



Barro, Alassane & Moloney, Barbara & Porter, Kelly & Muller, Janine & Blackburn, Jason. (2016). Redefining the Australian Anthrax Belt: Modeling the Ecological Niche and Predicting the Geographic Distribution of Bacillus anthracis. PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases. 10. e0004689. 10.1371/journal.pntd.0004689.

Eligibility for TSE exclusion (Australia-wide)

Criteria: 18 month to 5 years old with at least 2 signs consistent with scrapie (e.g. neural signs such as altered mental state, sensation and postural movements before death)

Yes – collect brain in formalin + fresh/frozen 2–3cm of spinal cord and dorsal 1/3rd of cerebellum No

For more information, download the National TSE Surveillance Project (NTSESP) Field Guidelines 2021-22 or visit Animal Health Australia

Proceed to post-mortem – no suspicion of anthrax (or anthrax test negative)

Place carcass in left lateral recumbancy and open carcass to display stage and take photograph

Connective tissue/fascia

Discoloured – describe (e.g. jaundice, pallor, etc.) Normal, consistent with rest of observations

Thoracic cavity
Photograph thoracic cavity
Pleural fluid
Abnormal – describe fluid including quantity estimate, consistency and colour (e.g. 100ml thin, clear fluid)
2 Pericardial fluid
Abnormal – describe fluid quantity, consistency and colour, +/- presence of fibrin Normal
3 Pericardial fat deposits
None Minimal Moderate (standard amount on a healthy ewe)
Lung texture
Normal – sponge-like Abnormal – rubbery (oedema or some viral pneumonias) Abnormal – liver like (consolidation) Other, describe any other lung texture change Unable to assess
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Thoracic cavity (continued)

Lung colour (NB – some congestion in the absence of textural change doesn't necessarily mean pneumonia. If unilateral discolouration on dependent side, likely liver mortis. Bilateral congestion can occur as a result of post-mortem change. If bilateral congestion this can occur when blood forced into lungs during rigor or due to post-mortem bloating. A normal lung is still be spongy compared to a pneumonic lung)
Normal – some livor mortis of down side or congestion in absence of textural changes is normal post mortem Abnormal – describe colour and distribution
Lung pleural surface (NB – pleural fibrosis: areas of pale connective tissue may appear on dorsal surface of normal lung. Pulmonary emphysema may be present due to agonal gasps and is generally of no significance unless there is a history of respiratory distress) Normal – some livor mortis of down side or congestion in absence of textural changes is normal post mortem
Abnormal – describe (e.g. fibrinosuppurative pleurisy, fibrin, other lung surface observations including colour, size and distribution of any lesions (e.g. 3 x 50c coin sized abscesses cranioventral lobes, lung worm nodules dorsal, etc.))
Pulmonary consolidation Yes – lung sinks in water, describe distribution of consolidation (e.g. cranioventral lung fields) No Unable to access
Beart – epicardial abnormality (NB – epicardial and endocardial petechiae and ecchymosis are common and a normal finding especially in euthanased ruminants. If concerned about septicaemia or a clotting disorder there will also be haemorrhage elsewhere in the body) Yes – describe lesions on epicardium No Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
 Heart – endocardial abnormalities (NB small foci of fat are normal) Yes – describe endocardial abnormality No Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Any other remarkable observations in thoracic cavity including tracheal contents, tracheal trauma, cut lung surface lesions, heart valve lesions and abnormalities of the bronchial tree (including foam, blood, worms, digesta, pus)
Yes – describe No

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Hepatic system (continued)

2 Cut surface of liver
Abnormal – describe Normal Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Distended or thickened gall bladder (NB gall bladder distension may occur following anorexia. Bile becomes more watery with time off feed)
Yes – describe No
Spleen (NB: splenic enlargement may occur with barbiturate euthanasia and can occur with anthrax (along with other changes))
Abnormal – describe Normal
Other observations of hepatic system
Gastrointestinal
Photograph gastro-intestinal system
Rumen – serosal surface
Abnormal – describe (e.g. haemorrhages, fibrin, adhesions, etc.)
Rumen – mucosal surface (NB check ventral mucosa – more likely location for lesions. Rumen mucosa sloughs normally within an hour of death. Exposed submucosa may be pale if animal exsanguinated, otherwise intensely red. Not evidence of rumenitis unless also oedema, exudate or haemorrhage (mucosa less likely to slough))
Abnormal – describe (e.g. inflammation, fibrin, scarring, short papillae, sloughing mucosa) Normal Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis

Gastrointestinal (continued)

Rumen contents (NB rapid distension of rumen resulting in tympany is common post-mortem. Only diagnostic of frothy bloat if rumen is full of frothy foam)
Briefly describe fill and nature of contents, include pH if carcass fresh enough.
Reticulum – serosal
Abnormal – describe (e.g. haemorrhages, fibrin, adhesions, etc.)
S Reticulum – mucosal
Abnormal – describe (e.g. haemorrhages, fibrin, inflammation, fibrin, scarring, sloughing mucosa (this can be a normal after death change) etc.)
6 Omasum – serosal surface
Abnormal – describe (e.g. haemorrhages, fibrin, adhesions, etc.)
7 Omasum – mucosal surface
Abnormal – describe (e.g. haemorrhages, fibrin, inflammation, scarring, sloughing mucosa (this can be a normal after death change) etc.)
Normal Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Abomasum – serosal surface (NB: action of stomach acid PM may result in abomasal wall breakdown and subsequent rupture. Antemortem rupture of abomasal ulcer will be associated with acute peritonitis signs (e.g. fibrin, pus, and inflammation))
Abnormal – describe (e.g. haemorrhages, fibrin, adhesions, etc.)
Abomasal – mucosal surface (NB: mucosal reddening seen in sheep that have recently eaten. Gastritis always accompanied by oedema, ulceration, fibrin or haemorrhage)
Abnormal – describe (e.g. haemorrhages, fibrin, inflammation, scarring, sloughing mucosa (this can be a normal after death change, evidence of parasitism (inhibited larvae)) etc.) Normal Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis

Gastrointestinal (continued)

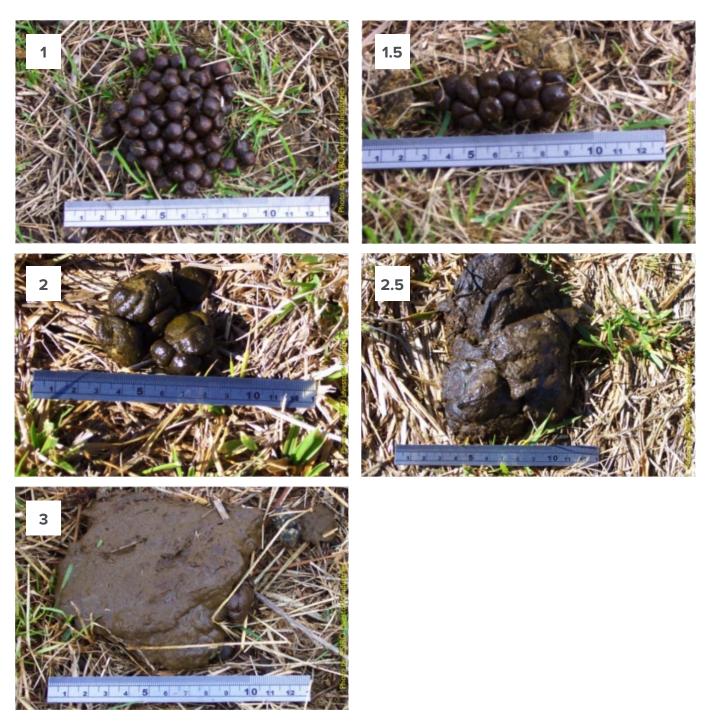
💿 Small intestine – serosal surface
 Post-mortem bile leakage into duodenum can cause duodenum and proximal jejunum to dilate, become thin-walled and dark green. Bile also stains surfaces of organs in close contact (bile imbibition). Large oval or linear, white raised plaques on ileum and jejunum are normal (Peyer's patches). They may extend around circumference of intestine. Small intestine intussusception may occur post-mortem. May see congestion associated with post-mortem intussusception. If it occurred antemortem, see oedema, haemorrhage and fibrin.
Normal
Abnormal – select abnormal SI serosal surface observations and select location
Haemorrhages Fibrin Adhesions Other
Duodenum Jejunum Ileum Small intestine – mucosal surface examined at several points
Small intestine – mucosal surface (NB segmental intestinal congestion and diapedesis should not be confused with haemorrhagic enteritis. Variable settling of blood as peristalsis subsides results in areas of blue-black congestion giving a segmental appearance. Congested segments may fill with bloody fluid as vessels break down (diapedesis). Haemorrhagic enteritis will have discolouration plus oedema, ulceration, fibrin (and necrosis) and oedematous mesenteric lymph nodes).
Normal Abnormal – describe lesion and location (use abbreviation; Jejunum 'J', duodenum 'D' and ileum 'I')
Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
2 Ileocaecal thickening
Yes No Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
19 Large intestine – serosal surface
Normal Abnormal – describe lesion and location (use abbreviation; Jejunum 'J', duodenum 'D' and ileum 'I')
Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Large intestine – mucosal surface examined if suspicious of abnormality (NB linear reddening or tiger striping on colonic and rectal mucosa due to clotting of trapped blood in contracted organ. This is not necessarily diagnostically significant)
Normal Abnormal Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Take faecal sample

Gastrointestinal (continued)

Faecal consistency (see below images, wormboss.com.au/sheep-goats/tests-tools/tests/assessing-faecal-consistency-score.php or scan the QR code for information on assessing the faecal consistency score)

1 1.5 2 2.5 3 Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis





(B) Other GI observations including oesophageal observations (e.g. capsule trauma)

Urinary system
Photograph urinary system (if abnormalities present)
1 Kidney capsular surface
Normal Abnormal – describe lesion and whether bi- or unilateral Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
2 Kidney cut surface
Normal Abnormal – describe lesion and whether bi- or unilateral Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Perineal fat deposits
None Minimal Moderate Large
Adrenal glands (NB: haemorrhage and congestion of adrenals can be normal agonal change. Can also occur in septicaemia-pair with other lesions. Haemorrhage and congestion of adrenals can be normal agonal change or may be associated with disease. Pair with other PM findings)
Enlarged Normal Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis Other – describe
9 Ureters
Normal Abnormal – describe lesion and whether bi- or unilateral Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Bladder wall (NB: linear reddening or tiger striping on bladder mucosa may occur due to clotting of trapped blood in contracted organ. Not diagnostically significant)
Normal Abnormal
Urine dipstick results (record level – number of +)
Protein Blood Glucose Ketones Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
Other other urinary tract observations

T	Reproductive tra	act	
	There is a risk of exposure Appropriate PPE and good		post mortems, especially on pregnant ewes.
	Photograph	External surface of uterus	Is ewe currently pregnant?
0	reproductive system	Normal Abnormal	See below
Y	es – complete this section if e	ewe was pregnant at time of death	Cervix
1 Fo	petus/es in utero		Normal Abnormal – describe (e.g.ring womb (failure to dilate), trauma/tear)
2 La	ımb weights (in kgs)		
1	kg 2 kg	3 kg 4 kg	Is an abortogenic agent suspected?
3 La	mb crown rump lengths for	pre-term foetus/es (in cms)	Note: foetal lesions consistent with an abortogenic agent vary with stage of gestation and the agent but include congenital malformation, mummification, a distended abdomen, increased serosanguinous pleural and peritoneal fluid, subcutaneous oedema,
1	cm 2 cm	3 cm 4 cm	hepatomegly and liver lesions. Placental lesions consistent with this diagnosis include necrotic cotyledons and placentitis.
	a foetus in birth canal? es – the presentation is norm	al (forelimbs and head first)?	No Yes. What is the suspected abortogenic agent? (Ensure good PPE and submit foetus and placenta through state vet department for testing)
	lo – describe abnormal prese	ntation	Any other comments on reproductive tract of pregnant ewe
Y		reservation and developmental age? fferences between lambs in ion state	No – Complete this section if ewe was not pregnant at time of death (i.e. already given birth, lost a pregnancy, never pregnant)
			If not currently pregnant, is there evidence that the ewe has given birth?
			No – uterus shows no signs of pregnancy
	timate age or developmenta sscribe wool distribution etc.)	stage of foetus	Yes (e.g. perineal trauma, lochia, incomplete uterine involution, well developed udder, lamb found dead near by, etc.)
7 Pł	notograph foetus/es		2 Fluid witin the uterus
			Mucopurulent Frank blood Lochia
	ongenital foetal abnormalitie	s No	Other – describe Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
-			3 Endometrium
	petus starting to decompose		Normal Abnormal – describe
	es No		Unable to accurately assess due to autolysis
10 AI	mniotic fluid		
	lormal – clear 🗌 Abnormal	- describe (e.g. meconium, etc.)	
	nable to assess due to autoly	rsis	Cervix of non-pregnant ewes Normal Abnormal – describe (e.g. trauma/tear, etc.)
11 PI	acenta		
		ribe (comment on placentomes	Any other observations of reproductive tract of non-pregnant ewes?

Photograph femur Femur – bone marrow
Femur – bone marrow
Normal Gelatinous Other – describe
2 Femur – cortical bone
Appears thin Normal thickness
Femur – trabecular bone
Deficient Appears sufficient
• Other observations of femur
Other skeletal abnormalities
No Yes – describe
Any visible muscular abnormalities
No Yes – describe
Neurological system
Neurological system Only open skull, spine and/or sample peripheral nerves if:
 Only open skull, spine and/or sample peripheral nerves if: Suspicion of neuro disease (e.g. phalaris staggers) Evidence of neuro disease antemortem (e.g. neuro signs observed) TSE exclusion
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Only open skull, spine and/or sample peripheral nerves if: Suspicion of neuro disease (e.g. phalaris staggers) E bridence of neuro disease antemortem (e.g. neuro signs observed) TSE exclusion SDI No Yes - check box for samples required Brain Cervical spinal cord Other spinal cord segments Peripheral nerves CSF fluid Other - describe



Record the most likely diagnosis and any alternative diagnoses, based on the gross PM findings.

This can be adjusted later following further consideration of case, discussion with colleagues and the additional information obtained from results of samples submitted for diagnostic testing.

1 Primary diagnosis including any contributing disorder linked to the primary diagnosis Dystocia – describe (e.g. malpresentation, Metabolic disease – mixed Gastrointestinal parasitism

foetal/ewe size, uterine inertia, incomplete cervical dilation, or unknown)	Metabolic disease – hypomagnesemia	Other GI disorders – describe
Septicaemia – describe likely origin	Mastitis	(e.g. Yersinia, Salmonella)
(e.g. metritis, peritonitis, pneumonia, etc.) Trauma – describe (e.g. ruptured bladder	Vaginal prolapse	Accident – describe
(antemortem), ruptured uterus (antemortem), ruptured uterine artery, etc.)	Uterine prolapse	Foot disease – describe
Metabolic disease – hypocalcaemia		(e.g. resulting in recumbency)
Metabolic disease – pregnancy toxaemia		Other – describe

2 Alternative diagnosis

Dystocia – describe (e.g. malpresentation,	Metabolic disease – mixed	Gastrointestinal parasitism
foetal/ewe size, uterine inertia, incomplete cervical dilation, or unknown)	Metabolic disease – hypomagnesemia	Other GI disorders – describe
Septicaemia – describe likely origin	Mastitis	(e.g. Yersinia, Salmonella)
(e.g. metritis, peritonitis, pneumonia, etc.)	Vaginal prolapse	Accident – describe
(antemortem), ruptured uterus (antemortem), ruptured	Uterine prolapse	Toxicity – describe
uterine artery, etc.)	Dorsal-vaginal wall rupture	Foot disease – describe
Metabolic disease – hypocalcaemia	Flystrike	(e.g. resulting in recumbency)
Metabolic disease – pregnancy toxaemia	riysuike	Other – describe

Samples taken

Record which samples have been taken (and labelled)	
Aqueous humour Faecal sample Fixed tissue - describe which Smears/swabs Fresh tissue Other fluid (e.g. peritoneal, pleural, urine etc.) Samples unable to be taken (e.g. due to predation, insufficient faecal matter etc.)	
Other samples taken for any other investigations?	
SDI TSE Private testing Other – describe investigation types requested	
References: Jubb T Disease Investigation 2014; Jubb & Perkins 209 Veterinary Handbook, MLA and Australian Livestock Export Corporation Ltd, www.veterinaryhandbook.com.au)	
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