High dietary salt during pregnancy in ewes alters the responses of offspring to an oral salt challenge

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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March 2007
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**ABSTRACT**

Most research to date has focused on non-pregnant sheep grazing saltbush to fill the summer/autumn feed gap in temperate regions of southern Australia. However, the summer/autumn period coincides with late pregnancy for autumn- or winter-lambing ewes, and feeding saltbush may reduce the amount and cost of supplementary feed that is required to meet the energy demands of late pregnancy. The challenge of dealing with a high-salt diet may be exacerbated during pregnancy since pregnancy is a salt-retaining physiological state, yet a high-salt intake requires an increase in mechanisms to excrete salt. The effect of high dietary salt on the developing foetus(es) has been studied in rodent models, but less so in sheep. Hence the aims of this thesis were to determine whether pregnant ewes can manage a high dietary salt content resembling that found in saltbush, and whether there are consequences to the offspring’s physiological responses to ingested salt.

Merino ewes were synchronized for ovulation and artificially inseminated. To mimic the concentration of salt in animals grazing saltbush-based pastures in summer and autumn, a diet of 13% NaCl was fed from insemination through to parturition. It was found that pregnant ewes can be fed a 13% NaCl diet and manage the physiological conflict of high salt and pregnancy by decreasing their aldosterone concentrations and increasing their water consumption. There was no effect of high dietary salt on pregnancy rates, lamb birth weights, lamb survival or milk composition (fat and protein percentages).

A series of experiments were conducted to test if the high-salt intake of ewes during pregnancy was associated with a change in the dietary preference for salt and/or changes in physiological responses to ingested salt in the offspring (‘S lambs’ vs. control, ‘C lambs’). C lambs and S lambs were exposed to short- and long-term preference testing to determine if there were differences in their voluntary selection for salt in their diet. There were no significant differences in dietary salt preference between C and S lambs.
The lambs were subjected to salt 'challenges' (oral dose of 40 g NaCl in 25% w/v solution) from 3-10 months of age and their water intake, urinary output, sodium excretion and hormone concentrations were measured over the ensuing 23 hours, and compared against counterparts dosed with an equal volume of water without salt. Following the initial salt challenge further experiments were conducted with slight alterations; water intake was manipulated immediately following the salt challenge; two consecutive salt challenges, 8 hours apart, were administered; and C and S lambs were offered salty water (1.5% NaCl) over a period of two days.

The results of these salt challenge experiments showed that C and S lambs excreted a salt load at a similar rate, but they differed in the magnitude of changes in water intake and hormone concentrations required to achieve sodium homeostasis. S lambs were able excrete sodium at the same rate as C lambs but without decreasing aldosterone concentrations to the same extent and whilst consuming 400 mL less water in the first two hours post challenge. The aldosterone results suggested a lowered responsiveness to aldosterone and the lower water consumption suggested an altered thirst threshold. The experiment in which water consumption was manipulated suggested that when the supply or access to fresh water is limited, the capacity to remove a salt load is likely to be less impaired in S lambs than C lambs; S lambs were able to excrete the salt load faster than the C lambs when the availability of drinking water was limited. From the experiment in which lambs were treated with two consecutive salt challenges, the rate of sodium excretion increased after the second dose, but there remained no difference in the rate of excretion between C and S lambs; all animals were able to excrete 95% of the administered dose of sodium within 23 hours. The final experiment in which animals were given salty water (1.5% NaCl) for a period of two days showed consistent results with the previous experiments for water consumption and aldosterone concentrations between C and S lambs. There was no difference in sodium excretion between
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C and S lambs. A novel finding was a markedly lower voluntary feed intake in S lambs than C lambs. Although mechanisms for this are unknown, it may have profound effects on the productivity of the animals.

The experiments reported in this thesis provide new information of relevance to pregnant ewes grazing halophytic forages. It is apparent that they can withstand a high NaCl content typical, of a saltbush-based pasture. Further work is warranted to conclude whether high salt during pregnancy is (i) beneficial to the offspring in regards to a higher capacity to deal with excess salt under farming conditions and (ii) consistently associated with a lower voluntary feed intake of the offspring.
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis does not contain material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Serina Digby
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisors, Dr. Dean Revell, Dr. David Masters and Professor Phil Hynd, for your support, knowledge and enthusiasm during my canditure. To Dean specifically, thank you for everything, your patience, you encouragement, your humour, your friendship and the door of your office to lean against and make sour faces. You have been there for me every step of the way, through my undergraduate years, my honours and my PhD. I have learnt so much from you, not just in research, but also in life, and I have valued every pep talk that you gave me. I wish you and your family all the best in the years to come.

A special thanks goes to Grant who helped move, drench and treat my animals whilst on the Roseworthy farm. Thank you to students that helped perform the experiments, with a special mention to Anna Toland, and husband, Dan Thompson, who not only helped but provided me with a bed and food on those late nights of lambing and collection.

A sincere thank you goes to the team at the University of Western Australia, specifically Margaret Blackberry and Dominique Blanche for analysing blood samples for progesterone, aldosterone and AVP. Also, thank you to the team at the University of Adelaide, Waite Campus for analysing urine and feed samples. For statistical analysis I would like to thank Dr. Julian Taylor. Financial support from an Australian Postgraduate Award, CSIRO top up and funding for operating costs from the CRC for Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity was greatly appreciated and acknowledged.

Finally I would like to thank my family who have supported me through 7 years at University. The financial and emotional support was appreciated and will never be forgotten. Thank you Mum, Dad and Chantelle and also thank you Ryan for just being there and being you.
ABBREVIATIONS

µg: Microgram
µL: Microlitre
°C: Degrees Celcius
ACE: Angiotensin-converting enzyme
ad libitum: Without restraint
ADF: Acid Detergent Fibre
Ang II: Angiotensin II
ANP: Atrial natriuretic peptide
AQP2: Aquaporin 2
AT₁: Angiotensin II receptor 1
AT₂: Angiotensin II receptor 2
AVP: Arginine Vasopressin
BSA: Bovine serum albumin
C: Control lambs
cm: Centimetres
CP: Crude protein
cpm: Cycles per minute
DM: Dry Matter
DOC: Desoxycorticosterone
EDTA: Ethylenediamine tetraacetic acid
et al: and others
g: Grams
GPB: Gelatin phosphate buffer
H₂O: Water
HCl: Hydrochloric acid
hrs: Hour
IGF1: Insulin like growth factor-1
IU: International Units
IUGR: Intrauterine growth retardation
kg: Kilogram
L: Litres
m: Metre
M: Molar
mg: milligrams