Monitoring lamb survival – the debate
By Deane Carson, Regional Manager Southland

Recently causes of deaths for lamb results presented at an 'Improving lamb survival' seminar provided much debate for farmers. The Ovita/AgResearch survey results indicated that 65-46% of lambs die because of dystocia. This is contrary to most expectations that starvation and exposure usually cause lamb losses. The fact triplets were more susceptible to dystocia compared to twins also raised questions.

Farmers have questioned how the diagnosis was defined and secondly, if there was multiple diagnosis, how was a decision achieved. This trial was a scientific trial undertaken under the strictest of conditions. The question that should be asked is 'are we identifying deaths incorrectly in the paddock'.

Dystocia is commonly identified as a swollen head and neck. What is not easily seen is bruising under the skin. Extensive bruising can cause death and may not easily be identified by an external examination. This year if you have deaths from unknown reasons feel the animal for bruising and if your really keen, whip off the skin and have a look underneath to see if you can find bruising.

Accepting the results leads to several further questions:

- Is there a relationship between ewe dimensions and dystocia?
- If so, is there between and within breed differences?
- Does bearing triplets result in pelvic constraints?

And the list goes on. Ovita and AgResearch have accepted that this research has resulted in as many questions being asked as have been answered. For this reason they are looking for funding sources to pursue the genetic and environmental influences.