most of the preterm newborns <32 weeks. It remains to be determined whether increased tolerance of asphyxia or greater difficulty in recognition of severe complications in preterm newborns <32 weeks are factors contributing to these results.

Apgar scores are valuable predictors of newborn complications in the preterm newborns of both the asphyxia and control groups. However, as in the term newborn, the Apgar score at 1 minute is a better predictor than the Apgar score at 5 minutes.

The results of this study indicate that intrapartum fetal asphyxia with metabolic acidosis is an important factor in the occurrence of severe complications in the central nervous system, respiratory system, and kidney in preterm newborns.

Arterial oxygen saturation in relation to metabolic acidosis in fetal lambs

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OBJECTIVE: We studied the relationship between preductal arterial oxygen saturation and metabolic acidosis in 18 chronically instrumented fetal lambs (gestational age 119 to 133 days) in two experimental designs. In the first group the onset of metabolic acidosis was determined. In the second group the progression of metabolic acidosis was studied as was the cardiovascular and hormonal changes resulting from hypoxemia.

STUDY DESIGN: In nine fetal lambs maternal fraction of inspired oxygen was lowered stepwise by increasing flows of nitrogen delivered into the trachea through a small indwelling catheter (group 1), and in nine fetal lambs maternal blood flow was reduced stepwise by means of a vascular occluder (group 2).

RESULTS: Baseline arterial oxygen saturation values ranged from 26% to 67% with normal pH and extracellular fluid base excess values in both groups 1 and 2. In both groups pH and extracellular fluid base excess started to decrease below 30% arterial oxygen saturation, with a progressive decrease below 20% arterial oxygen saturation to an end value for pH of 7.14. In some fetal lambs pH and extracellular fluid base excess decreased initially at 20% to 30% arterial oxygen saturation and then stabilized at the lower level. Fetal heart rate in group 1 increased during hypoxemia from 155 to 179 beats/min. In group 2 baseline fetal heart rate was 153 beats/min and fell with every step change in arterial oxygen saturation but subsequently increased to 172 beats/min by the end of the period of hypoxemia. Baseline values for epinephrine, norepinephrine, dopamine, cortisol, and mean arterial pressure were not related to baseline arterial oxygen saturation levels, and each of these variables was increased at the end of hypoxemia in group 2.

CONCLUSION: Preductal arterial oxygen saturation can reach values between 20% and 30% before anaerobic metabolism starts. During the progressive acidosis blood pressure was increased, which can be attributed to a strong rise in catecholamines. (Am J Obstet Gynecol 1995;172:810-9.)

Key words: Arterial oxygen saturation, hypoxemia, acidosis, fetal lamb

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Reduced oxygen supply is the primary cause of fetal asphyxia. If hypoxemia is prolonged, aerobic metabolism cannot be maintained and metabolic acidosis develops. During labor continuous fetal heart rate (FHR) monitoring is used to detect fetal hypoxemia. Specific FHR patterns can be recognized as a result of hypoxemia, but the specificity is low. With the development of fetal pulse oximetry, arterial oxygen saturation (Sao2) can be measured continuously during labor and can give direct insight into fetal oxygenation. If pulse oximetry is to be used clinically as a monitoring technique, the relationship between Sao2 and metabolic acidosis should be known.

The first clinical measurements with fetal pulse oximetry suggest that Sao2 is linearly related to umbilical artery pH. This is in contrast with experiments in unanesthetized fetal lambs. Studies with stepwise reduction of uterine blood flow or induction of maternal hypoxemia showed that Sao2 can be reduced substantially before metabolic acidosis occurs. Moreover, in fetal lamb studies in which oxygen consumption was determined, oxygen delivery could be reduced below 50% before anaerobic metabolism was manifested by an increase in lactic acid and a decrease in pH and base excess. In most of these studies blood samples were only taken at the end of each hypoxic period, which does not give insight into the time of onset of the metabolic acidosis and its rate of progression.

We studied the relation between Sao2 and metabolic acidosis in fetal lambs as follows. First, we determined the onset of metabolic acidosis while fetal hypoxemia was induced by maternal hypoxemia. Then the hypothesis derived from the first experiments was tested in a second set of experiments in which fetal hypoxemia was induced by graded reduction of uterine blood flow, and the progression in metabolic acidosis was studied. In these latter experiments we also studied the cardiovascular and hormonal changes with hypoxemia. Sao2 was measured in arterial samples and simultaneously with pulse oximetry.

Material and methods

Surgery. Eighteen ewes of the Dutch Texel breed were operated on between 119 and 133 days of gestation (term 147 days). Anesthesia was induced intravenously with 30 mg/kg pentobarbital with 0.5% atropine and was maintained with 2.0% enflurane in a 2:1 mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen (ER 300 respirator, closed system ventilation, LKB Medical AB, Bromma, Sweden). The temperature of the ewe was kept constant by means of a thermostatic heating pad underneath the animal.

In group 1 (nine ewes) a tracheostomy of 1.5 cm² was made in the neck by partially removing one or two tracheal rings and suturing the skin to the tracheal wall; during the experiments this tracheostoma was used for an indwelling catheter to change maternal fraction of inspired oxygen (FiO2). In group 2 (nine ewes) the abdomen was opened through a paramedian incision, after which the uterus was temporarily lifted out of the pelvis and covered with soaked gauze. The peritoneum was opened over the trifurcation of the aorta into the common internal iliac artery and the external iliac arteries. A flexible inflatable occluder (diameter 8 or 10 mm, Rhodes Medical Instruments, Woodland Hills, Calif.) was placed around the common internal iliac artery, and an electromagnetic blood flow sensor (diameter 3.5, 4, or 4.5 mm with slot cover, Skalar, Delft, The Netherlands) was placed around the internal iliac artery leading to the pregnant horn. In all ewes a pedal artery was catheterized.

The fetal lamb was approached by hysterotomy near the fetal head. A muscle of the forelimb was prepared, and a transmission sensor (Oxibaud or prototype Dura Y-sensor, Nellcor, Pleasanton, Calif.) was placed in a stainless-steel support around the muscle, leaving 7 mm of space between light-emitting diodes and photodiode. The light-emitting diodes emit red and infrared light through the tissue, and from the cardiosynchronous alternating light intensities caused by the pulsating blood volume in the tissue Sao2 can be estimated. A second sensor was placed around muscular tissue of the other forelimb or around a double layer of skin in the neck of the fetus. Three electrocardiogram electrodes were sutured subcutaneously on the sternum, right shoulder, and left side in the neck. Polyvinyl catheters (inner diameter 0.8 mm, outer diameter 1.0 mm) were inserted in the carotid artery, the jugular vein, and the amniotic cavity. The uterus was then closed and all electrodes and catheters were exteriorized through a skin incision in the ewe's flank and packed into a pouch on the ewe's back. Before the skin was closed 10 IU of penicillin was administered into the peritoneal cavity.

The animals were allowed to recover 4 days before experiments were started. On the day of operation and during the recovery period antibiotics were administered daily: streptomycin, 5 mg intramuscularly to the ewe; ampicillin, 125 mg intramuscularly to the fetus; and ampicillin, 125 mg into the amniotic cavity. Catheters were kept open by continuous infusion of heparinized saline solution (5 IU/ml at 1 ml/hr). Food and water before and after surgery were given according to the rules of the animal laboratory. The experiments were approved by the local ethical committee for animal research.

One arterial blood sample (0.4 ml) was taken each day during the recovery period to assess fetal condition.

Experiments

Group 1. After a 1-hour baseline period fetal hypoxemia was induced by stepwise reduction of the maternal FiO2 by a tracheal catheter inserted in the tracheostoma
Fig. 1. Relationship between Sao2 and pH and extracellular fluid base excess (BEecf) of first blood samples on day of experiment of total group of fetal lambs (n = 18). ■, pH (Pearson correlation coefficient $r = -0.29, p > 0.10$); ▲, extracellular fluid base excess (Pearson correlation coefficient $r = -0.16, p > 0.10$).

from 20% to 10% in steps of 2.5%. Each level was maintained initially for 30 minutes but subsequently longer when pH and extracellular fluid base excess started to decrease. Arterial blood samples were taken from the fetus at 15-minute intervals during the whole experiment.

FHR and pulse oximetry were recorded continuously. Maternal arterial samples were taken in the baseline period, at the lowest point of hypoxia, and in the recovery period.

Group 2. After a 1-hour baseline period uteroplacental blood flow was reduced stepwise by occluding the common iliac artery to achieve fetal arterial Sao2 levels of 30% to 40% or <30%. Each level was maintained for at least 1 hour. Fetal arterial blood samples for blood gases and pH (0.2 ml) were taken at 7.5-minute intervals and samples for Sao2 (0.2 ml) at 30-minute intervals and after each reduction in blood flow. When pulse oximetry indicated that Sao2 was out of the intended range, an additional sample for Sao2 was taken. If necessary, blood flow was further reduced until the intended Sao2 range was again achieved, and then this period was prolonged. In these instances each period lasted ≥1 hour. Such additional reductions had to be performed in three fetal lambs at the 30% to 40% Sao2 level. After the first hour of recovery samples were taken at 1-hour intervals until baseline values were reached again. At the start of the experiment and the end point of hypoxia, fetal arterial blood was collected for measurement of epinephrine, norepinephrine, dopamine, and cortisol levels (3 ml). Total blood loss was estimated to be within 10% of the total blood volume. Fetal arterial blood pressure and amniotic pressure were measured at the level of the ewe's back. These signals, FHR, and pulse oximetry saturation were recorded continuously.

Data analysis. The fetal blood samples were analyzed within 5 minutes to assess Sao2 (Instrumentation Laboratory 482, Lexington, Mass.), pH, and blood gases (Instrumentation Laboratory 1312). Results were corrected to 39°C. Then the oxygen content and the extracellular fluid base excess were calculated according to the formula used by the Instrumentation Laboratory blood gas analyzer. The extracellular fluid base excess is assumed not to be affected by a change in $P_{O_2}$. All fetal lambs in group 1 showed a progressive decrease in pH and extracellular fluid base excess below a certain level of Sao2. Before the onset of metabolic acidosis these variables showed a wide range at baseline (the variation in Sao2 could, for instance, fluctuate between 50% and 68%). Therefore a moving average was calculated for Sao2 and extracellular fluid base excess with three successive values.

Blood samples for fetal hormones were collected on ice. Catecholamines were measured by high-performance liquid chromatography with fluorometric detection (interassay variation <12%, intraassay variation <4%). Cortisol was measured by a standard radioimmunoassay.

The pulse oximetry sensors were connected to pro-
Table I. Mean values (SEM) of fetal blood variables and FHR during baseline period, end of hypoxic period, and recovery period of group 1 fetal lambs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Baseline (n = 9)</th>
<th>End of hypoxia (n = 9)</th>
<th>Recovery First hour (n = 9)</th>
<th>Recovery End point (n = 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$S_\text{ao}_2$ (%)</td>
<td>47.9 (4.2)</td>
<td>17.4 (1.2)*</td>
<td>48.6 (3.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxygen content (mmol/L)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.3)</td>
<td>1.0 (0.1)*</td>
<td>2.8 (0.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P_\text{co}_2$ (mm Hg)</td>
<td>19.2 (1.2)</td>
<td>0.9 (0.5)*</td>
<td>19.6 (1.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P_\text{co}_2$ (mm Hg)</td>
<td>43.6 (0.8)</td>
<td>38.9 (1.0)*</td>
<td>41.6 (1.1)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>7.37 (0.01)</td>
<td>7.27 (0.01)*</td>
<td>7.37 (0.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracellular fluid base excess (mmol/L)</td>
<td>0.3 (0.5)</td>
<td>-4.8 (0.4)*</td>
<td>-1.3 (0.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemoglobin (mmol/L)</td>
<td>7.0 (0.2)</td>
<td>7.2 (0.2)</td>
<td>7.2 (0.2)</td>
<td>165 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FHR (beats/min)</td>
<td>170 (5)</td>
<td>165 (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.001, compared with baseline value (Student paired t test).
*tp < 0.05, compared with baseline value (Student paired t test).
*tp < 0.01, compared with baseline value (Student paired t test).

type N-400 pulse oximeters (Nellcor). For group 1 the data of the pulse oximeter were not used in the current study. In group 2 $S_\text{ao}_2$ values were obtained from the N-400 pulse oximeter. The median value of the SD of residuals around individual calibration lines was 3.7% (range 1.8% to 5.9%).

Instantaneous FHR was measured from the fetal electrocardiogram. Arterial and amniotic pressures were measured with disposable transducers (TDN-R, neonatal use, Viggo Spectramed, Headfield, United Kingdom). Measurements of blood pressure (corrected for intraamniotic pressure) and FHR were averaged over the last 5 minutes in each period and during the nadir after the occlusion. The blood flow sensor was connected to an MDL 1401 electromagnetic flowmeter (Skalar). Maternal blood flow measurements were only used to verify the occlusion and were not further analyzed. All continuous signals were stored and calculated on a personal computer with the program Poly (Physiological Analysis Package, Inspektor Research System, Amsterdam).

Statistics. Blood gas values and cardiovascular variables were analyzed by Student paired t test and fetal hormones by Wilcoxon’s signed-rank test. A Bonferroni correction was performed to obtain the proper p values, where more than one comparison was made. Blood gases and pH, $S_\text{ao}_2$, FHR, carotid blood pressure, and fetal hormone levels were compared between baseline, hypoxia, and recovery periods. Values are expressed as mean (SEM) for each group. For fetal hormone levels a logarithmic transformation was also carried out, and the relationship with the change in $S_\text{ao}_2$ and pH was analyzed by the linear regression least-squares method.

Results

Baseline period. During the recovery from surgery $S_\text{ao}_2$ values for each fetus remained stable in a range similar to the value found later in the baseline period, and pH was always $\geq 7.34$. $S_\text{ao}_2$ showed intra-individual variations of between 4% and 18% of the respective mean values during the first hour of the baseline period.

In Fig. 1 the first blood sample values of the baseline periods are plotted for both groups 1 and 2 (n = 18). $S_\text{ao}_2$ varied from 26% to 67%. There was no correlation between $S_\text{ao}_2$ and pH (Pearson correlation coefficient $r = -0.29$, $p > 0.10$) or between $S_\text{ao}_2$ and extracellular fluid base excess ($r = -0.16$, $p > 0.10$).

Group 1. With stepwise reduction of the $P_\text{co}_2$ from 21% to 10%, maternal $P_\text{co}_2$ decreased from a mean of 104 mm Hg to 57 mm Hg at the lowest point. Fetal $S_\text{ao}_2$ decreased to a mean lowest value of 17.4% (Table I). To investigate the relationship between $S_\text{ao}_2$ and the onset of fetal acidosis, the change in the moving average in extracellular fluid base excess in a 10-minute interval was calculated and plotted against the moving average in $S_\text{ao}_2$ (Fig. 2). When the moving average of $S_\text{ao}_2$ reached 30%, the rate of change in extracellular fluid base excess was between -0.5 and 0.5 mmol/L per 10 minutes. Below an $S_\text{ao}_2$ of 30% the changes in extracellular fluid base excess started to exceed -0.5 mmol/L per 10 minutes, with larger decreases in extracellular fluid base excess at lower $S_\text{ao}_2$ values. This was true for all fetal lambs. At the end of the recovery period pH, extracellular fluid base excess, and the oxygen variables had returned to baseline values in all but one instance. This lamb died unexpectedly after the first hour of recovery although the pH had almost returned to the baseline level.

Maternal and fetal $P_\text{co}_2$ values showed small declines during hypoxia, probably because of maternal hyperventilation. Fetal hemoglobin concentration showed no significant change throughout the study.

FHR increased during the hypoxic period and was significantly higher at the end of this period. FHR increased further to a mean value of 105 beats/min during the first hour of recovery and returned slowly to baseline values by the end of the experiment. In one
Fig. 2. Change in moving average of extracellular fluid base excess (dBEcf/dt) in relation with moving average of SaO₂ in nine fetal lambs, from start of experiment until moment of lowest extracellular fluid base excess. Each animal is represented by different symbol. o, Lamb died during recovery period.

Table II. Mean values and SEM of fetal blood variables, FHR, MAP, and time of period, during baseline period, SaO₂ 30% to 40%, SaO₂ < 30%, and recovery period, at end of each subsequent period of group 2 fetal lambs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline (n = 9) (last 5 min)</th>
<th>SaO₂ 30%-40% (n = 7)</th>
<th>SaO₂ &lt; 30% (n = 9)</th>
<th>Recovery (n = 9) (last 5 min)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SaO₂ (%)</td>
<td>53.6 (4.2)</td>
<td>35.6 (0.9)*</td>
<td>18.2 (1.5)*</td>
<td>47.8 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxygen content (mmol/L)</td>
<td>3.3 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.3 (0.2)*</td>
<td>1.3 (0.1)*</td>
<td>2.9 (0.2)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Po₂ (mm Hg)</td>
<td>21.4 (1.3)</td>
<td>17.7 (0.6)*</td>
<td>15.4 (0.6)*</td>
<td>21.4 (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PcO₂ (mm Hg)</td>
<td>47.2 (0.8)</td>
<td>49.4 (0.8)*</td>
<td>58.2 (2.0)*</td>
<td>46.9 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>7.36 (0.01)</td>
<td>7.33 (0.01)*</td>
<td>7.14 (0.02)*</td>
<td>7.35 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracellular fluid base excess (mmol/L)</td>
<td>1.5 (0.4)</td>
<td>0.5 (0.6)</td>
<td>-9.7 (0.6)*</td>
<td>0.4 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemoglobin (mmol/L)</td>
<td>6.9 (0.4)</td>
<td>6.7 (0.5)</td>
<td>7.1 (0.4)</td>
<td>6.5 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAP (mm Hg)</td>
<td>44.4 (2.3)</td>
<td>45.3 (2.8)</td>
<td>49.1 (3.0)*</td>
<td>57.4 (2.8)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FHR (beats/min)</td>
<td>153 (6)</td>
<td>120 (6)*</td>
<td>159 (3)</td>
<td>172 (13)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of period (min)</td>
<td>60 (0)</td>
<td>77 (7)</td>
<td>135 (21)</td>
<td>174 (38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FHR and MAP are measured as mean around nadir and last 5 minutes of period.
* p < 0.001, compared with baseline value (Student paired t test).
† p < 0.05, compared with baseline value (Student paired t test).
‡ p < 0.01, compared with baseline value (Student paired t test).

Fetal lamb FHR decreased below 100 beats/min when FIO₂ was lowered from 12.5% to 10%.

Group 2. Fetal blood gas variables, FHR, and mean arterial pressure (MAP) for these fetuses are summarized in Table II. Two fetal lambs started with baseline SaO₂ of 30% to 45%. In these two lambs the first reduction resulted in an SaO₂ < 30%. In the remaining fetuses SaO₂, Po₂, and oxygen content were significantly reduced at a level of SaO₂ of 30% to 40%. PcO₂ rose and pH decreased immediately after the occlusion but did not change further during this reduced level of 30% to 40% SaO₂. Extracellular fluid base excess decreased in a way similar to the pH but not statistically different (Fig. 3). The variable responses to the stepwise occlusions were not related to gestational age or weight of the fetus. FHR decreased in all animals, reaching a nadir within 1 to 3 minutes, but returned to baseline levels by the end of the SaO₂ 30% to 40% period. MAP increased significantly during this period from 44.4 to 49.1 mm Hg (p < 0.01).
With the second reduction of blood flow $\text{SaO}_2$, $\text{PO}_2$, and oxygen content decreased further and $\text{PCO}_2$ values increased. The effect on pH and extracellular fluid base excess was not identical in all fetal lambs. In two fetal lambs pH and extracellular fluid base excess decreased at an $\text{SaO}_2$ level of 20% to 30% but showed a subsequent stabilization in pH and extracellular fluid base excess after 1.5 hours (Fig. 3, upper panel). In seven fetal lambs pH and extracellular fluid base excess decreased constantly below an $\text{SaO}_2$ of 25%; six of those fetal lambs had $\text{SaO}_2$ values <20% (Fig. 3, lower panel). MAP rose in all fetal lambs to a mean maximum value of 57.4 mm Hg ($p < 0.001$) at the end of the hypoxic period. FHR decreased within 1 to 3 minutes after the increased occlusion but increased significantly by the end of the hypoxic period. After the occlusion was
reduced, all animals showed a period of tachycardia in which FHR rose significantly (compared with baseline) to a mean value of 189 beats/min (SEM = 9). In six fetal lambs FHR was still increased at the end of the experiment, although pH and extracellular fluid base excess had normalized. Fetal hemoglobin concentration showed no significant change throughout the study. All blood gas variables had returned to baseline values by the end of the hypoxic period except for oxygen content, which was still depressed.

Baseline levels for fetal catecholamines and cortisol showed wide ranges: dopamine 0.05 to 0.30 ng/ml, norepinephrine 0.37 to 1.83 ng/ml, epinephrine 0.01 to 0.12 ng/ml, and cortisol 7.0 to 24.0 ng/ml. There was no relationship between these values and baseline values for fetal 

Comment

In this study we have determined the relationship between preductal and metabolic variables as measured by pH and extracellular fluid base excess in fetal lambs at a premature age of between 0.81 and 0.90 of gestation. Baseline 

Table III. Mean values and SEM of fetal hormones during baseline and at end point of hypoxia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>End hypoxia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dopamine (ng/ml)</td>
<td>0.10 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.85 (0.33)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norepinephrine (ng/ml)</td>
<td>0.87 (0.18)</td>
<td>7.81 (2.55)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epinephrine (ng/ml)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.01)</td>
<td>3.62 (2.83)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortisol (ng/ml)</td>
<td>11.2 (1.8)</td>
<td>34.6 (5.5)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.01, compared with baseline values (Wilcoxon’s signed-rank test).
In contrast to the studies cited above, Jensen et al. showed that acute severe reduction in uterine blood flow resulted in a linear relation between oxygen supply and oxygen consumption for the whole fetus and that graded reduction in uterine blood flow resulted in a

assuming and have shown that oxygen delivery could be reduced to about 50% of control before oxygen consumption began to decrease. With further reduction below 50% of baseline oxygen delivery, fetal oxygen consumption fell and metabolic acidosis developed.
linear relationship between oxygen supply and oxygen consumption for the lower carass. When the fetal lungs were ventilated in utero, Askura et al. also found a linear relation between PO_2 and oxygen consumption. Moreover, when fetal skeletal muscle cells were studied at various levels of oxygenation in monolayer culture, this linear relation was also found. In the study of Jensen et al., however, the reduction of blood flow resulted in an immediate SaO_2 decrease below 20% with subsequent metabolic acidosis. These investigators did not look at the consequences of milder hypoxemia. In the study of Askura et al., metabolic acidosis occurred only when oxygen content was < 2 mmol/L. Similar findings have been reported by Peeters et al. An oxygen content of 2 mmol/L corresponds to an SaO_2 of 20% to 33% if hemoglobin ranges from 6 to 10 mmol/L. At these levels of oxygenation oxygen consumption of vital organs such as heart and brain can be maintained because of redistribution of fetal blood flows. In most of these studies the maternal Fio, was lowered stepwise, and the decrease in SaO_2 and the increases in catecholamines and cortisol, as was reported by Jensen et al. In that study hypoxemia and acidemia were closely interrelated. Paulick et al. found that catecholamines started to increase exponentially when postductal SaO_2 values reached 15% to 20%. In our study only the decrease in pH and the increases in catecholamines were linearly related. This suggests that it is not the decrease in SaO_2 that is the determinant of the increase in catecholamines, but rather the degree of acidemia that is a consequence of the lack of oxygen.

In conclusion, oxygen delivery normally has a reserve in fetal lambs. Depending on the baseline level of oxygenation, oxygen delivery can be reduced substantially before oxidative metabolism is compromised and metabolic acidosis begins. SaO_2 may decrease to 30% before a progressive decrease is seen in pH and extracellular fluid base excess. At an SaO_2 of 20% to 30% a new balance of oxygen supply and oxygen consumption may develop. Below an SaO_2 of 20% oxidative metabolism can no longer be maintained, and this will inevitably result in a progressive fall in pH and extracellular fluid base excess. If pulse oximetry is to become a monitoring technique during labor, it is important to know whether such a safety level also exists for the human fetus.

We thank Ineke Verbruggen, Jane Grevels, Jan Mensen, Theo Arts, and Biny Ringnalda for technical assistance; the Laboratory of Endocrinology and Reproduction for measurements of fetal hormones; and Professor C.B. Martin, Jr., for his critical comments during preparation of the manuscript.

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