**The different factors influencing the intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) efficacy in goats sheep**

**Marie B. A. Eloriaga1, Listya Purnamasari2, Joseph F. dela Cruz1\*,**

**1**Department of Basic Veterinary Science, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of the Philippines Los Baños

Laguna 4031, Philippines

**\*Correspondence** : E-mail: jfdelacruz@up.edu.ph, Phone +63-9369361601

**2**Animal Husbandry Study Program, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Jember

Jl. Kalimantan No.37, Jember, Jawa Timur 68121, Indonesia

**ABSTRACT**

Intracytoplasmic sperm injection is performed by microscopically injecting a sperm cell into an egg cell's ooplasm effectively bypassing usual steps taken in natural reproduction. ICSI in goats and sheep provides opportunities for better genetic selection to potentially improve small ruminant production. It has also shown promise for wildlife conservation by preserving spermatozoa from endangered species. Different factors that affect the success rate of ICSI in sheep and goats have been categorized into external and internal factors. Reproductive seasonality suggested that oocyte harvest can be done year-round but efficient oocyte development occurs during breeding (autumn) season. Superovulation is induced in goats and sheep via administration of follicle stimulating hormone (FSH), luteinizing hormone (LH), equine chorionic gonadotropin (eCG), and pregnant mare serum gonadotropin (PMSG). Toxins accumulating around the ICSI-produced embryo such as free radicals and ammonium ions has led to embryonic arrest. Female animals cannot be juvenile nor geriatric to be able to produce viable oocytes for ICSI procedures. Donor animals with proper nutrition and ideal weight produced high quality oocytes. Boer goats were found to be polyestrous and sensitive to hormonal treatment making them the ideal breed for ICSI. Proper sourcing and management of the oocyte has greatly affected success rates of ICSI. Fresh sperm from male donor animals produced more blastocysts than frozen-thawed sperm. Frozen-thawed sperm however has shown excellent membrane integrity important for ICSI-embryo development. Immobilizing sperm by breaking the tail before ICSI has increased blastocyst yield. ICSI success rates are affected by external and internal factors responsible for sex gamete quality.

***Keywords****: assisted reproductive technology (ART), goats, intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), sheep, small ruminants*

**BACKGROUND ←**

In livestock, semen samples are valuable sources of genetic material and are opening endless possibilities in livestock management and breeding practices. It is therefore important not to waste these resources and use them to their full potential. In livestock, death of a genetically superior animal or the animal's inability to mate is detrimental to the industry (Parmar et al., 2013). Genetically superior but biologically inferior males are not only unsuccessful in natural mating but are also less successful in in vitro fertilization (IVF) and most artificial insemination (AI) procedures as well (Keskintepe et al., 1997).

Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI) is a type of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) where a microscopic needle injects the sperm cell or sperm head / nucleus directly into the egg cell's ooplasm. It is a type of micromanipulation that circumvents all the usual steps in a typical mating procedure. ICSI can utilize sperm not only from semen samples but also from epididymal and testicular samples as well (Shulman et al., 1999; Vernaeve et al., 2003). The steps encompassed in an ICSI procedure include sperm immobilization, mechanical insertion of the sperm into the oolemma, and oocyte activation (Wang et al., 2007; Rahman 2008). It also shows potential in sex sorted spermatozoa that is crucial in goat milk production (Hamano et al., 1999; Parmar et al., 2013). Goat sperm is also being used as DNA carriers in livestock (Perry et al., 1991). ICSI in wildlife is playing a major role in conservation of endangered species (Keskintepe et al., 1997). ICSI not only conserves entire species of animals, but also preserves superior genetics in livestock (Wang et al., 2003).

ICSI birth in sheep and goat are limited to only a few although success rates are dependent on both external (environmental) and internal (sex gametes, breed, and age) factors (Caprera et al., 2007). The scope of this review article will be factors affecting the success rate of ICSI procedure in goats and sheep.

**DISCUSSION**

**Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI)**

***History and Application of ICSI in goats and sheep production***

The successful birth of Louise Brown spearheaded by Steptoe and Edwards opened the door for other countries worldwide to utilize ART to tackle infertility. Lopata et al. (1980) produced the first in vitro fertilization (IVF) birth in Australia and then four years later in 1984, the first IVF birth in the United States was successfully performed by Jones et al. (1984). By 1988, the first few developments included creating a hole or a crack in the zona pellucida itself to facilitate fertilization by the sperm (O'Neill et al., 2018).

By the end of the 1980s, subzonal injection (SUZI) was developed to avoid going through the zona pellucida itself. This method takes the spermatozoon and places it directly in the perivitelline space, thus bypassing the zona pellucida (O'Neill et al., 2018). When Gianpiero Palermo accidentally pokes a hole in the egg cell membrane and into the ooplasm while performing SUZI experiments, he inadvertently lets a spermatozoon enter the egg's cytoplasm thus discovering a new ART technique called Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI). ICSI is injecting a single acrosome and sperm membrane intact spermatozoon, sourced from the testicles or epididymis, directly into the ooplasm where it results in a fertilized metaphase II (MII) oocyte (Uehara and Yanagimachi, 1976; Vernaeve et al., 2003 García-Roselló et al., 2009, Palermo et al., 2015; Dyer et al., 2016). This implies that the ICSI technique bypasses the typical fertilization process such as plasma membrane and cortical region interactions. It has been stated in a research conducted by Jimenez-Macedo et al. (2006) that oocyte quality has reduced disparity caused by sperm penetration. Moreover, high quality MII oocytes injected via ICSI have better chances at fertilization and embryo development.

Although Steptoe and Edwards were considered the pioneers in IVF and ICSI, it was Lillie (1914) and Hiramoto (1962) who were the first to dabble in ART that led to ICSI development in humans. Specifically, Hiramoto microinjected live spermatozoa in echinoderms Psammechinus microtuberculatus, Paracentrotus lividus, and Clypeaster japonicus in their research. In amphibians, Graham (1966) and Brun (1974) experimented on the Xenopus laevis commonly known as African clawed frog. Graham's experiment included inducing ovulation via injection of gonadotropic hormones and microinjection of sperm in the egg cells where the vegetal pole of the frog eggs. Uehara and Yanagimachi in 1976 performed mammalian fertilization via ICSI in hamsters. These experiments, although crude, gave a solid foundation for ICSI's refinement as an ART.

Kimura and Yanagimachi (1995) performed ICSI experiments on mice and discovered that a piezo-driven micropipette was a better tool rather than the traditional pipette. The first live births via ICSI were reported in rabbits (Hosoi et al., 1988) and in cows (Goto et al., 1990). Wang et al. (2003) reported one live kid was successfully born from four goat recipients who received six ICSI-derived two-cell embryos.

Widjiati et al. (2020) conducted an experiment on Kacang goats to differentiate conventional IVF from ICSI and discovered that cleavage process was significantly higher in ICSI embryos partly due to the latter's ability to resist fertilization failure. Another study revealed that the rate of live goat embryos born via ICSI was significantly higher than conventional IVF (Speyer et al., 2019). The same results were obtained by Pereyra-Bonnet et al. (2011) in sheep where ICSI was the only method efficient enough to produce exogenous gene-expressing embryos.

The different indications of ICSI in livestock species are mostly production focused. ICSI is the recommended ART especially when conventional methods such as IVF fail (Coy and Romar, 2002). It is also indicated in cases where there are limited sources of sperm available. ICSI grants scientists the ability to obtain epididymal sperm even from deceased animals, especially from genetically superior males. Hammer et al. (1998) have also discussed the scientific importance and economic promise of transgenic livestock with higher-grade genetics. Their research first tackled transgenesis in mice and since that gave promising results, furthered their research to larger animals like rabbits, pigs, and sheep.

In the grand scheme of things, ICSI's applications have a much wider impact in the field of conservation. ICSI research has also provided options for wildlife species at the brink of extinction where sperm of these endangered animals could be preserved and microinjected in a donor oocyte. Livestock species have also been utilized in experiments instead of the valuable endangered species. Overall, ICSI sparked interest for possible better production parameters and an option if conventional IVF fails (Coy and Romar, 2002; Parmar et al., 2013).

**External factors affecting ICSI efficacy in goats and sheep**

***Season***

Multiple studies (Pintado et al., 1998; Gonzalez-Bulnes et al., 2003; Pierson et al., 2004; Souza-Fabjan et al., 2014) have garnered evidence that laparoscopic oocyte pick-up (LOPU) was performed multiple times at different intervals in goats, all in different seasons, and influenced the oocyte's development. Specifically, Pierson et al. (2004) investigated the four different seasons; Autumn (September-December), Winter (January-March), Spring (April-June), Summer (July-August); and their possible effect on LOPU-derived oocytes. The recovery rate of the pooled oocytes from each of the seasons were 92%, 90%, 88%, and 90% respectively. The results of the experiments revealed that sufficient oocytes were obtained regardless of the seasons they were harvested in as long as proper care and management of the donor animals have been taken into consideration. However, the study was limited to the number of oocytes obtained rather than the quality and competence of the oocytes to advance to the next stages of fertilization.

Souza-Fabjan et al. (2021) suggested that perhaps reproductive seasonality in adult goats can improve the retrieved oocyte's ability to forge ahead in the fertilization process. The study mentioned that the caprine species is a seasonal breeder, specifically autumnal breeders, thus hormones and systemic processes, both important in reproduction, can be influenced by seasonal change. The study reported that cleavage rates were 72% in autumn, 71% in summer, 66% in winter and 51% in spring. Additionally, cumulus-oocyte complexes produced higher blastocyst rates in autumn (52%) compared to the remaining seasons (approximately 40%). These findings can be corroborated by Mara et al. (2014) where Sarda sheep have shown to have increased blastocyst rate during the breeding season. We can therefore deduce that although oocytes can be harvested throughout the year, the breeding season (autumn) can significantly improve oocyte developmental efficiency by increasing cleavage and blastocyst rates (Souza-Fabjan, 2021).

***Medications given***

Superovulation gives ICSI procedures better chances of increasing fertilization and embryo development. Two frequently administered gonadotropin treatments are Follicle Stimulating Hormone (FSH) and equine chorionic gonadotropin (eCG). However, FSH needed veterinary guidance more since it requires more doses while eCG needed only one dose or injection therefore also making the eCG cheaper in cost compared to FSH (Monniaux et al., 1983). FSH with suitable levels of Luteinizing Hormone (LH), although more expensive, has proven to be more effective than eCG in inducing superovulation in goats (Nuti et al., 1987; Mahmood et al., 1991; Nowshari et al., 1992). This just denotes that eCG acts less like LH, and behaves more like FSH instead. After all, exorbitant amounts of the LH causes inactivity of the LH receptors that then causes premature follicles to luteinize and ovulate prematurely and may cause significant superovulatory response reduction in the ovaries (Herrler et al., 1991).

However, goats have now developed eCG antibodies in their immune system as a result of continuous exogenous hormonal treatment for the past years. Due to this immune response, donor goats have displayed estrus postponement and decrease in fertility (Chemineau et al., 1999; Roy et al., 1999; Drion et al., 2001b; Baldassarre and Karatzas, 2004). Holtz (2005) determined that inciting superovulation in goats by utilization of a hormone called Pregnant Mare Serum Gonadotropin (PMSG) without using eCG has shown promising results in improving genetic selection and increasing goat population when done hand in hand with ICSI. Nevertheless, further investigation and refinement on proper dosage and drug intervals on PMSG has to be done in order to maximize the drug's benefits.

Both FSH and LH were found to be successful in inducing superovulation in sheep. In under 24 hours, the oocytes obtained from sheep and cattle supplemented with the hormones underwent maturation (Catt and Rhodes, 1995). Pereyra-Bonnet et al. (2011) reported that superovulation treatments for in vivo embryo production in sheep prior to performing ICSI. The medications they chose were FSH and eCG, and had similar indications and purpose in goats.

***Environmental conditions surrounding the embryo***

The environment surrounding the goat or sheep embryo that underwent an ICSI procedure was found to influence its embryonic development. Approximately 80% of sheep embryos (Gomez et al., 1997) while 100% of goat embryos (Jimenez-Macedo et al., 2005) produced via ICSI all sustained embryonic arrest on the 16-cell to morula stage of development (Rahman, 2012). Further investigation of the possible causes documented metabolic activity products and by-products. These artifacts were accumulating to toxic concentrations detrimental to the embryo's growth and development (Phua, 2006). Ruminant embryological development has been hindered by oxygen-derived free radicals formation and accumulation causing decreased oxygen levels have negatively affected intracellular hydrogen peroxide levels (Noda et al., 1991; Rieger, 1992; Goto et al., 1993; Nagao et al., 1994; Thompson et al., 1996). Byatt-Smith et al. (1991) stated that this could possibly be due to a component in vivo that is actively scavenging free radicals or it could be insufficient oxygen levels in vivo.

Gardner in 1994 observed that an accumulation of ammonium ions was linked to incorporating amino acids in IVC medium. It was recommended to replace the medium before the ammonium ions reach toxic levels or to enzymatically extract ammonium from the culture medium (Gardner, 1994). Comparably, Thompson et al. (1992) discovered that in vitro ovine embryo development is discouraged by L-lactic acid accumulation. This accumulation has been previously associated with utilizing excessive sodium DL-lactate solution (33 mM).

**Internal factors affecting ICSI efficacy in goats and sheep**

***Female factors: age***

Age of donor nannies and ewes has affected superovulation and other ovarian responses in goats and sheep. Jainudeen et al. (2000) stated that different age groups also require different physiological needs that also affect reproductive responses of the donor goat. Lehloenya et al. (2005) revealed that young donor goats have a longer timespan between removed controlled internal drug release (CIDR) until the onset of estrus. Evidence of these negative effects from steroid use include longer response time and resistance of young goats to the exogenous hormonal treatment. Both stimulus and hormonal treatment therefore must be increased in young goats to elicit an ovarian response (Baril et al., 2000). Nanny goats and ewes 3 years old and below have been reported to have poor superovulatory responses. Immature ovaries have a dominant follicle causing a suppressed total follicular recruitment and a decreased response to exogenous gonadotropin treatment. Immature goats compared to mature goats are more affected by the negative inhibitory effect of steroids and inhibin (Torres et al., 1987; Dingwall et al., 1993; Driancourt, 2001; Senger, 2003; Lopes et al., 2006). Oocytes produced by prepubertal goat donors are less likely to develop into viable embryos because of cytoplasmic insufficiency, metabolic, and cell architecture abnormalities (Keskintepe et al., 1997; Armstrong, 2001; Cognie et al., 2003). Abnormal fertilization from prepubertal oocytes was also observed and these include prominent maternal chromatin, deficiency in the formation of sperm aster, inability of the sperm head to undergo decondensation (Damiani et al., 1996; Salamone et al., 2017; Villamediana et al., 2001).

Carnevale et al. (1993) stated that the decreasing reproductive competence that comes with a donor goat's old age is caused by smaller pre-ovulatory follicles failing to achieve final meiotic maturation before undergoing ovulation. Impaired insulin-like growth factors (IGF) secretion, decreased gonadotropin levels both in circulation and production, and higher susceptibility to inhibin's feedback mechanism have also been reported. All these factors result in the failure of antral follicle growth, crucial in increasing oocyte viability, to develop in older donor goats fully and properly. Old donor goats are also less likely to produce viable oocytes (Carnevale et al., 1999; Morris and Allen, 2002; Santoro et al., 2003; Morel et al., 2010).

A study by Jimenez-Macedo et al. (2007) revealed that prepubertal goats had a blastocyst yield from ICSI oocytes at 13% in 2006. In 2007 they conducted the same study and produced a higher yield of 35%. Comparatively, adult goats produced a yield of 18% in 1997 while a higher yield of 35% was obtained in 2003 (Keskintepe et al., 1997; Wang et al., 2003).

***Female factors: weight***

Richards et al. (1989) highlighted how anoestrus was positively correlated to severe weight loss in all kinds of domestic species. Studies have shown that nutritional intake of the donor animal affected different aspects of the ovarian activity. Changes in important metabolic hormones such as insulin and insulin-like growth factor-I (IGF-I) as well as change in plasma metabolites were observed. Decrease in growth factors and hormones obtained from follicular fluid were also noted in the study. All these cause a significant decrease in follicular growth in the animals' ovaries (Gutierrez et al., 1997; Gong et al., 2002; Landau et al., 2000; Armstrong et al., 2001; Diskin et al., 2003; Ferguson et al., 2003; Mihm and Bleach, 2003).

***Female factors: breed***

Boer (occasionally crossbred with Jamnapari) goats are known to be highly fertile , polyestrous, and are capable of producing viable oocytes all throughout the year (Abdullah et al., 2008; Braga Lobo et al., 2010). At the peak of their fertility, this breed of goats also exhibited increased sensitivity to hormonal stimulation making them susceptible to exogenous hormonal treatment, produce higher oestrus response, exhibit oestrus faster than other breeds, and have a reduced duration between CIDR removal and the start of the oestrus cycle (Lehloenya et al., 2005). Ammoun et al. (2006) reported that all animals injected with ovine Follicle Stimulating Hormone (oFSH) have shown higher plasma FSH levels. Inconsistency among breeds within animal groups however may be due to route of administration, the specific preparation for the hormone utilized, or simply by how different breeds eliminate the hormone mutable ways as well. Moreover, differences among breeds can also be attributed to the increase or decrease of FSH receptors expressed on the ovaries (McNeilly, 1985; Driancourt et al., 1986; Fry et al., 1987; Demoustier et al., 1988; Abdennebi et al., 1999; Dufour et al., 2000).

***Female factors: oocyte***

A crucial factor in increasing success rates of ICSI in goats and sheep is the donor oocyte as one of two sources of gamete cells (Merchant et al., 2011). Pivko et al. (1995) has revealed that goat and sheep embryos undergo embryonic arrest during the 8-16 cell stages which is its supposed genome activation stage as well. Jimenez-Macedo et al. (2005) stated that 100% of goat embryos underwent embryonic arrest on the 16-cell morula stage. While a study by Gomez et al. (1997) observed that 80% of sheep embryos met the same fate. Villamediana et al. (2001) reported that chromosomal abnormalities were observed in 50% of goat embryos. Rahman (2012) stated that poor oocyte quality and inadequate enzymes produced by the embryo have been known to cause embryonic arrests. Moreover, evidence of genetically rooted debilitated embryo regulation as well as oocyte nondisjunction were also observed.

Goats need artificial activation to activate their oocytes while sheep need a sham injection. This helps the oocyte achieve the 16-cell stage however it is important to note as well that those treated by ICSI that developed to blastocyst stage were only at 8% compared to the 18% when IVF was utilized.

***Male factors: fresh vs frozen-thawed sperm***

Livestock semen stock has practically been stored frozen and thawed only when needed in the future. Hashida et al. (2005) remarked that fresh goat spermatozoa produced a distinction from frozen-thawed spermatozoa in terms of mitochondria as well as plasma and acrosomal membranes where the membranes in the frozen-thawed semen samples were observed to have loose and expanded properties. The diminished IVF rate in frozen-thawed samples compared to fresh samples can be attributed to the aforementioned observations in plasma and acrosomal membranes. Menendez-Blanco et al. (2019) utilized pre-pubertal goat oocytes and produced 18.46% blastocysts from freshly collected semen compared to the 12.12% from frozen-thawed semen samples.

Morphology, DNA fragmentation, membrane integrity and vitality are the four parameters established in a 2019 study by Gonzalez-Castro and Carnevale to help predict frozen-thawed sperm samples' performance in ICSI procedures. The study revealed that embryo development in ICSI procedures had higher chances of survival in frozen-thawed semen samples that had excellent membrane integrity and vitality.

In 2001, Bartoov initiated the Intracytoplasmic morphological sperm injection or IMSI in order to aid in this selection. IMSI includes a more sophisticated sperm selection method where the sperm is evaluated under high magnification of up to x6600. Other techniques were the ones used by Gianaroli et al. (2010) by utilizing polarized light in the sperm selection process. The polarized light was able to distinguish the acrosome-reacted spermatozoa via their birefringence. Stanger et al. (2010) discussed the hypo-osmotic swelling test (HOST) and how, prior to microinjection, specific spermatozoa with even minute traces of DNA fragmentation can be distinguished.

***Male factors: sperm cell membrane permeability***

Improving ooplasm-sperm sub-membrane interaction is a crucial step in ICSI procedures (Perry et al., 1999). The microneedle utilized in ICSI procedures as well as the piezo-pulse manually breaks the sperm's tail and has yielded 35% blastocysts (Wang et al., 2003). Once the sperm is immobilized, the sperm plasma membrane is damaged as well, thus instigating oscillation of intracellular Ca2+. Nuclear decondensation of the sperm, a key step in proper fertilization, is induced by the prior oscillation. If done correctly, next steps of fertilization occur and will all lead up to the first mitotic cleavage and most importantly, DNA synthesis.

There is also a non-chemical option to oocyte activation in ICSI. Mechanically breaking a hole in the oolema via a Piezo-driven needle has shown promising developmental rates in both cows and goats. Bori (2021) utilized crippled goat sperm samples in an ICSI procedure and concluded that sperm mobility was not necessary to successfully perform ICSI. On the contrary, utilizing motile spermatozoa that show signs of motion even after being injected resulted in 17.78% oocyte degeneration. Kimura and Yanagimachi (1995) discussed that oocyte degeneration occurs due to the sperm's movement disrupting the “oolema's wound healing”. Similarly, the sperm plasma membrane in sheep is damaged to improve blastocyst development by 15.5%. However, in contrast to the goat where the tail is broken first, the mechanical damage is directly performed on the acrosome and plasma membrane (Anzalone et al., 2016). Rahman (2012) has stated that sperm with scanty chromatin fail to undergo decondensation and have resulted in embryonic arrest

**CONCLUSIONS**

ICSI in goats and sheep have a production-centered history. This field of animal production and medicine is still an untapped resource having the potential to improve production parameters and using them to our advantage. They can be used to acquire superior hybridization of small ruminants through transgenesis. This can also be utilized in other species especially endangered animals where sperm count is limited to those who remain alive. Both the external and internal factors work hand in hand to produce the best possible outcome for ICSI as an ART. Further studies need to be done to improve factors that either encourage or discourage embryo development. In spite of this, its potential is boundless, going by the information gathered across various experiments.

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