CALVING EASE

March 2011

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Treating Too Many Calves for Scours

I was at a dairy meeting giving a talk about calf management. At lunch time a woman raising calves for their dairy farm asked me a question, "What can I do in a situation where I am treating too many calves for scours?"

In their 200-cow herd they normally had about 2 heifer calves a week. Questioning revealed that cows calved on a bedded pack. Calves were routinely left with the cows on this pack until the dam was milked. Colostrum was collected twice a day at the end of regular milkings. Fresh colostrum was fed at that time to any calf born since the last milking.

She acknowledged that their farm was not good at feeding colostrum promptly. And, they never evaluated colostrum for quality – they just milked the dam and fed whatever she gave. I asked if they had ever sampled colostrum for bacterial culturing from the nursing bottle or tube feeder as it was ready to be fed. "No, we have never done that," she said. Then she added, "We only feed as much as the calf wants to nurse from a bottle. We don't feed 4 quarts like you said in your talk."

In my talk I had explained how it was possible to monitor how well a colostrum feeding program was working through blood testing. Well, they had never done that, either. And, they had never sampled the raw waste milk they were feeding the calves so it could be checked for bacteria contamination.

The milk feeding program, she explained, was simple. Every calf received 2 quarts of raw waste milk twice a day all seasons of the year. Calves were fed with buckets – the same bucket being used for both water and milk.

Calves were housed in a small barn with a central work alley with a row of 12 pens on each side with plywood dividers. The barn has windows rather than curtains on the sides. When closed up in cold weather she said it was warm enough so that it had to get quite cold outdoors before water would freeze in the buckets.

In my presentation I included a four-step protocol for cleaning equipment used with colostrum and milk. [See www.atticacows.com, click on Calf Facts and scroll to "Washing milk containers protocol.] None of her procedures met these standards for effective cleaning.

What next? We took a sheet of paper and wrote down a list of possible actions that might lead to fewer calves needing to be treated for scours. Some, but not all, of them are below.

1. Take home the cleaning protocol she received at the meeting and follow it. Buy some rubber gloves (to wash in hot rather than lukewarm water), buy a tub of chlorinated detergent powder rather than rinsing in bleach solution without a detergent, buy a new brush that would fit into her nursing bottles.

2. Using sterile plastic bottles like those used by their milk truck driver, take samples of "as-fed" colostrum and raw waste milk. Work with their veterinarian to have them cultured for bacteria (both speciated and quantified). What species and how many bacteria are they dealing with when feeding calves?

3. Working with their veterinarian when he comes for bi-weekly herd health checks to get blood samples from calves between 2 and 7 days of age. Blood serum total protein levels should provide a picture on how well colostrum feeding is working.

4. Give higher priority to prompt feeding of colostrum. Consider using a colostrum replacer if colostrum feeding will be delayed more than 6 hours.

5. Put a gate in a corner of the bedded pack so that a newborn calf can be isolated. Gating calves off from cows allows a person to feed colostrum without the help of 20 dry cows and has the benefit of lowering pathogen exposure.

6. Improve her skills in using a tube feeder. She was the only person that knew how to use one and she admitted not feeling confident in placing the tube in a calf. Feed 4 quarts of colostrum to all the calves.

7. Talk with the herd veterinarian about using a colostrum supplement for heifer calves if she was not going to start checking colostrum for antibody concentration (for example, with a Colostrometer or a Brix refractometer).

8. Check out the possibility of replacing the plywood pen dividers with a non-wood product – probably plastic of some kind.

9. If the waste milk has a low bacteria count consider feeding more of it to the calves. Start feeding more in the fall months and continue until warm weather in the spring.

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