

Calving Ease

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Improving Treatment Success for Sick Calves

- **Three tasks critical to treatment success for sick calves.**
- **Preparing new employees for sick calf diagnosis and care.**
- **Bring in the herd veterinarian on a regular schedule to train and retrain the calf care person(s) on diagnosis, treatment and monitoring skills.**

I am fortunate to share office space with seven veterinarians that work full-time with dairy clients. This environment provides me with the opportunity to listen in on conversations about their on-farm experiences. A recurring calf care theme is the need to improve treatment effectiveness for sick calves (diarrhea, respiratory illness).

Depending on the calf care person and the dairy there seems to be a wide range of treatment effectiveness. On one hand, a few dairies have experienced very low turnover in calf care personnel. The extended experience coupled with coaching from their veterinarian clearly makes a difference in these three tasks:

1. Accurately diagnosing the nature of illness (for example, scours, pneumonia).
2. Following the treatment protocol(s) – if medication is given, the drug, dose, duration and route of administration is applied dependably and consistently.
3. Monitoring calf recovery – calves are observed consistently to make sure they have returned to normal eating patterns, normal body temperature – alternative treatment protocols are applied when calf does not recover within the number of days in the protocol.

[A resource on this is at www.calffacts.com , scroll down to “Evidence-based care for sick calves.”]

Then, on the other hand, there are the rest of the dairies. Turnover in calf care personnel may be high. New employees may lack sufficient preparation/training regarding sick calf diagnosis, treatment and care. Monitoring calf recovery may be given little or no attention.

What to do if you are not among the fortunate few dairies that have one of these talented and committed calf care persons?

First, remember that calves are valuable. Abandon the idea that caring for calves is the lowest, most poorly paid job on the dairy that can be done with only minimal training. I would like to see calf care as a position to be promoted TO rather than the bottom-most entry-level job to be promoted FROM. On one hand, we all recognize that some calf care tasks are simple and require very little training. For example, adding bedding to pens or hutches is pretty much a “just-do-it” job.

On the other hand, many tasks require dedicated attention and skillful adherence to established procedures in order to provide consistent and quality calf care. Examples are properly mixing milk replacer, diagnosing respiratory illness and administering local anesthesia before hot-iron dehorning calves.

Second, with new employees be sure to “on-board” them until they are confident in their ability to provide all aspects of calf care skillfully and responsibly. If the farm does not have written protocols for jobs like colostrum management, observing calves for scours and pneumonia, and treating calves for these illnesses take time to write these down. [A resource on protocol development is at www.calfacts.com, scroll down to “Standard Operating Procedures: How to Develop.”]

These protocols are great training tools for new employees. What to do. How to do it. When to do it. These can be standards for both training and performance evaluation especially for diagnosing and treating sick calves. [For a resource on performance evaluation go to www.calfacts.com scroll down to “Sanitation protocols: monitoring compliance.”]

Third, set a schedule of regular visits by your herd veterinarian focused entirely on calf wellness. “Regular” might be defined as seldom as twice a year or as often as monthly. If there has been a recent turnover in the lead calf care person I have found monthly visits could be very productive for at least the first six months on the job.

In my experience, this monthly or bi-monthly visit should involve a case-by-case discussion of individual calves and their recovery from scours or pneumonia. This is a training opportunity.

Also with a focus on calf wellness, teach the calf care person to follow a regular routine for assessing the effectiveness of the colostrum management program. This is done by blood sampling 10 or 12 calves between the ages of 2 and 7 days of age – blood serum total protein values will show how well the colostrum management program is creating strong immunity among the young calves. [For a resource on testing for newborn immunity go to www.calfacts.com and scroll to “Testing for Passive Immunity.”]

In addition, these regular “calf wellness” visit might include a sanitation audit for equipment used to collect, store and feed colostrum. Milk feeding equipment should be included, as well. Where are the cleaning successes and failures?

Sampling of both colostrum and milk/milk replacer for laboratory bacteria culturing will help the calf care person get a broad view of factors affecting overall calf wellness. Bacterial contamination of colostrum is a widespread problem. New calf care persons should be encouraged to obtain laboratory analyses regularly and use them to promote calf wellness.

If you know of someone that does not currently receive this monthly calf management newsletter but would like to, tell them to **CALL** 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or **FAX** (585-591-2898) or **e-mail** smleadley@yahoo.com with Subscribe as the subject.

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