

CALVING EASE

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Sam Leadley, Attica Veterinary Associates

Group Housing: Doing it Right This Time

- **In the not too distant past group housing had a really bad name.**
- **Recently we seem to have re-discovered group housing.**
- **Let's do it right this time and not repeat the mistakes of the past.**

Group housing 50 years ago

Too many dead calves, too many sick calves and unacceptable growth rates. What was going on? First, most of us were doing less than an average job in colostrum management. Many calves were left to nurse on the dam. When we hand fed colostrum 2 quarts was the standard amount (not enough). We did not realize the need to feed colostrum ASAP after birth (too late). Lacking the technology, we failed to measure quality of colostrum (low quality). Maybe we assumed that all colostrum was equal in antibody concentration. Technology for inexpensive checking for passive transfer of antibodies was not available. The research had not established guidelines for the three basic "Q's" of colostrum management: Quantity, Quickly, Quality.

Also, it was not a recognized best management practice to vaccinate cows with the goal of improving colostrum quality. We did not have the specialized vaccines for that purpose, either.

Second, we did not recognize the importance of newborn pathogen control. It was routine to leave calves with the dam and other adult cows. We did not recognize the threat that "manure meals" represented to newborn health. I cannot recall anyone sampling colostrum, milk or milk replacer to check on bacterial contamination. Research had not established the connections between the various bacteria exposure sites and calf health.

We often housed newborn calves in barns with adults. Or, we set up calf pens in sheds with minimal ventilation. Thus, in both situations air quality was poor with high levels of airborne pathogens. Standards for rates of air exchange had not yet been determined. The idea of "all-in, all-out" housing for dairy calves was nearly unknown.

Third, we were among the first generations to feed milk replacer. Milk replacer quality wasn't the greatest compared to what we have today. And, we fed just enough to keep the

calves alive until they could eat a grain mix long enough to develop their rumen. Nutrition for calves was pretty pitiful now that we look back on the late 1950's and early 1960's.

Leadley's Short List for Doing Group Housing Right

- **Do Colostrum Right.**

Follow the "Quickly, Quality, Quantity" rules in order to get strong immunity. Stack the deck in the calf's favor from the very beginning. I think it is important to add two more "Q's." First new one is "sQueaky" clean – keep bacteria counts in colostrum down. Second new one is "Quantify" passive transfer – regularly monitor the success rate of passive transfer.

Work with the herd veterinarian to set up and follow an effective adult cow vaccination program. And, organize work routines to collect colostrum from dams as soon as possible after they calve.

- **Do Newborn Care Right.**

Manage newborns to reduce pathogen exposure to the lowest practical level. This starts with having a clean place to calve. Then, after the calf stands we minimize her contact with manure – prevent "manure meals" from adults and dirty pens.

When we feed colostrum to calves we make sure our procedures for collecting, handling and storing colostrum maintain low bacteria levels.

- **Do Housing Right**

Recognize the vulnerability of calves to airborne transmission of diseases. When we set up group pens in the 21st century we should be smart enough to know how to provide plenty of good clean air. We especially want to avoid as much as possible housing our youngest heifers with older animals. Avoid housing calves downwind of large concentrations of older heifers and cows.

- **Do Feeding Right**

Take advantage of newer technology (computer feeders, ad lib feeding with feeding stations, acidified feeding, mob feeding) to provide adequate nutrition. Set the growth bar high – shoot for doubling heifer calves weight by the time they are 60 days old. Innovations in pasteurizing equipment and in new blends of milk replacers open the doors for high quality calf feed.

Let's do group housing right this time and not repeat the mistakes of the past.

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