

CALVING EASE

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THE "ONLY" WAY TO RAISE CALVES

"**Self-righteous** adj. having or characterized by a certainty, especially an unfounded one, that one is totally correct or morally superior" *The New Oxford American Dictionary, p 1548.*

It's a very human trait to slide into the opinion that the way a job is done at the present is the only way to do it. Nearly all of us have been there at one time or another in our lives. We often forget previous experiences. And, it's easier not to think too far into the future. This focus on the present is good. It allows us to get our work done. We build habits (both good and bad) that smooth out our work. In short, it's a lot more efficient to use our current methods to get our work done than to be always questioning things. We are confident that what we do today will work.

Sliding from confidence into self-righteousness

It's great to be confident. At the same time, we can all think of times when either an acquaintance or we ourselves have moved from confidence into self-righteousness. A person gradually becomes so confident that their practices are correct that they begin to believe that they are totally correct for all times and places. Conversations with them take on a tone of moral superiority. It's almost as if that they have the revealed truth and we are the unwashed and lost souls.

Don't laugh too hard. It's an incredibly easy slide from confidence to self-righteousness. If the calf enterprise goes very well for a long time who is to say that what is being done is not totally correct? Mortality under one percent. Sickness is seldom seen. Calves are growing like the proverbial weeds. It's really easy to slip into the mental set that if these practices are working so well here and now they should be adequate for all times and places.

Fortunately, very few of us who have made this slide get to stay there very long. Biology is a harsh master. Eventually, something will change and all will go bust! The water that has always been good turns up full of coliform bacteria. Sick and dead calves. We always buy clean springers but one of the purchased heifers calved last week and now half of the calves are sick with salmonella. Sick and dead calves. Or even worse, to our knowledge nothing has changed yet we are spending several hours daily treating scouring calves that just don't want to get better. There's nothing like biology to keep a person humble. So much for self-righteousness. Like a balloon pricked with a pin, it deflates.

Practices that protect us from self-righteousness

1. Set goals for the calf enterprise.

Regardless of where the enterprise was last year, this year things could improve. Suppose we treated one-half of the calves in the transition pens for respiratory illness last year. Our goal for this year could be to decrease that number by ten percent.

2. Measure progress toward our goals

You can't manage what you don't take time to measure. Suppose we are checking blood serum total protein levels on ten calves each month or quarter. This is a good way to measure the effectiveness of passive transfer antibodies from dam to daughter. Even if we only record "pass" or "fail" values we can see how well our colostrum management program is working.

3. Seek out learning opportunities

Pat yourself on the back. Just by reading this letter you have demonstrated that you are willing to seek out learning opportunities. Certainly there are a lot of print resources available at reasonable or no cost. There are articles and notes about calves in magazines such as Dairy Herd Management, Dairy Today, Hoard's Dairyman, and the Northeast, Midwest and Western editions of Dairy Business Management.

Electronic resources are online over the Internet. Jim Quigley maintains the site, www.calfnotes.com, for his Calf Notes as well as issues of this newsletter, Calving Ease. Links are available there to other animal science sources. All of the major land-grant state universities with animal science departments maintain sites.

Meeting face-to-face with other calf raisers also can be a great learning opportunity. It takes some time and persistence to get a group together. Even if the group gathers only a couple of time a year to talk with a resource person it's worth the effort. The Northwestern New York heifer discussion group has met sort of regularly for over ten years now. Many of those who attend say that they especially like the chance to talk with others before and after the formal part of meetings.

Once in a while go to a bigger meeting. The national Professional Dairy Heifer Growers Association (PDHGA) has an annual three-day meeting. It's at the beginning of April in 2004. Many of the regional PDHGA sections have meetings also. These are shorter and usually closer to home for folks in the region. Watch Calving Ease for announcements of these meetings or go to the national web site, www.pdhga.org.