

CALVING EASE

July 2005

Sam Leadley, Attica Veterinary Associates P.C.

Assumacy

We all simplify our lives by assuming many things about our environment. We assume the physical world will be predictable – gravity will work every time we go to pour milk into a bottle. We assume our social world will be constant – friends will remain friends. Without these assumptions, our lives would so unpredictable and chaotic they would be unlivable.

However, we can assume too much. If we add too much “assumacy”, we may get unpredictable results. For example, during a recent farm visit I observed an employee wash milk-feeding equipment. The water temperatures were not correct, the proper chemicals were not used, and there was no brushing. Just about everything was being done incorrectly.

I was puzzled when I saw this. A four-step protocol for washing milk containers was posted in front of the sink where the employee was working. When I asked about the protocol, she had not paid any attention to it. It was just one more thing on the wall in the milk house.

Her employer assumed that since the protocol was posted, employees would just automatically know what it was for and how to follow it. This was clearly not the case in this instance. Excess “assumacy” strikes again.

Common Incorrect Assumptions

Skills

I had the good fortune while raising calves to work with many high school students. Most of them had never encountered a calf before coming to work at the dairy. Only a few had farm experience.

Do you know where I ran into my biggest problems with “assumacy?” Not with the village students but with ones from farms. I just assumed that a farm raised teen-age worker would have skills such as determining the gender of a calf and feeding with a nursing bottle. Was I ever wrong!

My experience also taught me that until an employee can successfully demonstrate a skill, she or he does not have it. I recall showing a teenager how to put a halter on a calf. It seemed obvious to me. This part goes over the poll, this goes over the nose, tug on loose end to tighten. Can't get any simpler.

I came back. Something looked wrong. The lead rope came from the calf's ear! You can guess what went wrong – the halter was put on backwards. I assumed that showing was learning. Not true. Initially, I failed to stay there and watch the employee put the halter on correctly. Too much “assumacy.”

Knowledge

In rare instances, it is adequate preparation for a job just to learn a skill. However, what if circumstances change? Blindly applying a skill in every situation, especially on a dairy farm, is a recipe for bad results.

Often we are guilty of teaching skills without taking time to have the employee learn the “Why” behind the skills. Without the “Why,” all of us come up with seemingly practical responses to new situations that are inappropriate.

For example, every winter I find calf care persons, after feeding colostrum, rinsing their tube feeders with scalding hot water (not a good practice, it leads to biofilm buildup inside the tube feeder). This is in spite of the fact that they have a protocol that specifies using lukewarm water.

Why is practice different from protocol? The calf care person discovered that hot water seems to do a much better job than lukewarm water in rinsing the tube feeder. Hot water does a great job rinsing milk fat off an ice-cold feeder. Unfortunately, excessively hot water denatures the whey protein. This protein bonds to the inside of the tube feeder leading to biofilm buildup.

But, when the worker was trained for this job, no one explained why lukewarm water should be used and hot water avoided. When cold weather arrived, it seemed appropriate to switch to hot water. “Assumacy” strikes again. We cannot assume employees know enough about the farm procedures to adapt to changing situations.

Rules to Avoid Assumacy

1. Before asking employees to perform a job by themselves, have them demonstrate that they are proficient in these skills.
2. When new skills are involved, after you demonstrate how the task should be done have the employee repeat the task showing you that they can successfully do it in the way they were shown.
3. Provide information about “Why” to accompany tasks when training or retraining employees. Often these resources may be found at either www.atticacows.com or www.calfnotes.com.

Calf Care Tip

Summer is a difficult time for giving vaccinations. Heat and direct sunlight will inactivate modified live vaccines very rapidly. Mix the smallest amount possible before vaccinating. Try using an insulated lunch box if vaccinating more than one heifer. Add a cold pack to maintain a low temperature.

Remember that summertime calf body temperatures peak around 5:00 p.m. If possible, administer vaccines when calf body temperatures are lowest – very early in the morning. If morning temperatures are over 80F, consider delaying vaccinating.

If you know of someone that doesn't currently receive **Calving Ease** but would like to, tell them to **WRITE** to **Calving Ease**, 11047 River Road, Pavilion, NY 14525 or to **CALL** either 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or **FAX** (585-591-2898) or **e-mail** sleadley@frontiernet.net. A limited number of back issues may be accessed on the Internet at either www.atticacows.com or www.calfnotes.com and clicking on the link, Calving Ease.

Our thanks to Fort Dodge for sponsoring this issue of Calving Ease.