

Calving Ease

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How do You Respond to a Health Crisis?

In general, a crisis is a crucial or decisive point or situation. A turning point. An unstable condition. In calf care a health crisis often calls for a decisive and timely intervention to treat in illness or even to save the calf's life.

Typical health care crises

Problems connected with diarrhea or scours probably are the most common health care crises. Yesterday the calf was fussy drinking. Her manure was soft. Today she is listless, left half of her milk and has liquid feces. Almost certainly we now have a partially dehydrated calf with an intestinal infection.

Respiratory infections have a way of going quickly from minor congestion to full-blown infection with a fever over 105°. When we combine an intestinal infection with pneumonia in a young calf she often will go downhill very rapidly.

Timing of crises

In my experience most of the health care crises seem to be concentrated in the first four weeks of a calf's life. During the first week there can be calves that look fine one feeding, down the next and dead a few hours later. Between weeks one and two some calves may come down with devastatingly severe scours. And especially when calves are challenged by adverse weather conditions, it seems as though there are always fresh cases of pneumonia more often than is desirable.

Managing our response to crises

The last thing we want to do is to get into a downward spiral. That is likely to happen when we respond poorly. When we intervene too late. Or, when we choose the incorrect intervention. Our response during a crisis may cause us to neglect "regular" calf care procedures making everything worse. Our productivity tanks.

What are more positive alternatives?

- Organize your work. For example: Vaccinate calves on Tuesdays. Move calves on Wednesdays. Wash buckets and clean pens on Thursdays. Dehorn calves on Fridays. And, identify which of these jobs can be postponed a while without significantly compromising the quality of calf care. That way you know what to "neglect" when you need to spend extra time caring for sick calves.
- Keep track of your successes. Collaborate with your herd veterinarian to decide how to treat sick calves. Then, keep good enough records (even on a calendar) so you know how well your treatments are working – review this with your vet in order to keep improving.

- Look for ways to make calf care simpler, easier or quicker. Whenever possible take advantage of gravity to move fluids or grain. If you have a smooth hard floor, use a plastic barrel on a bag cart to make emptying water or grain pails easier. Keep a supply of navel dip at the first empty pen so redipping the navel is easy. Use a pump and a hose to move liquids rather than carrying buckets. When taking care of calves, make as many changes as possible match your weekly routines - like changes in feeding rates and weaning.
- Make a map or chart. The map shows where the calves are located. [Maybe more than one map if you have a lot of calves.] A map is visual, so it communicates lots of information rapidly. Mark on it stuff like sick calves and treatments, changes in feeding rates, “watch this calf” notes. Make a lot of copies so it is easy to update.
- Keep as much information as possible where the calf is located. Put the birth date on her ear tag or pen. If you treat with a drug, slip a colored zip tie on the pen/hutch, then, with a tag pen, draw a line on the tie for each treatment. Weaned? Add a colored tag or bit of tape to her hutch or pen. Plastic clothespins of different colors clipped somewhere out of the calf’s reach will work well, too.
- Regularly monitor calf immunity levels. “Regularly” might be monthly, quarterly or every six months. Work out an arrangement with your herd veterinarian to measure blood serum total protein levels. Learn how to draw blood yourself. For background see www.atticacows.com in Calf Facts; scroll to “Testing for Transfer of Passive Immunity.”
- Take time to visit with one or more calf raisers. Plan a lunch once a month with one or two folks from another farm. Share the good and the bad. Exchange helpful hints. Bring something you found on the Internet or clipped from a farm magazine.
- Have the courage to be the “calf advocate.” Someone in every calf-raising operation has to stand up for the calves to get adequate labor, supplies, housing, equipment, feed, etc. When folks try to hide when they see you coming then you have arrived!

Reference: Vaarst, M and J.T. Sørensen “Danish dairy farmers’ perceptions and attitudes related to calf-management in situations of high versus no calf mortality.” Preventive Veterinary Medicine 89 (2009) 128-133. **Also, many thanks to Shirley Macmillan, an agricultural journalist in England, for her insightful suggestions on this topic.**

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