

CALVING EASE

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Quality Care Every Day

Summary:

1. **Everyone depends on substitute workers to provide calf care.**
2. **Sometimes quality of calf care suffers when substitute workers provide care.**
3. **Rather than complain about poor quality calf care consider training and retraining substitute workers.**

Do you have one or more days when calf care is provided by persons other than the primary care givers? Nearly all of us have “substitute” workers. They fill in when the regulars have their day or shift off.

To what extent does calf care quality take a hit on these shifts? Are differences in milk replacer mixing introduced? How about amount of milk replacer fed – same amount as on regular shifts? Grain and water feeding is completed with same care as other days? Diagnosis of treatable scours or respiratory illness is as reliable as other days? Is the quality of supportive care for seriously ill calves remain high on these shifts?

First alternative: bitch, bitch, bitch

I talk to many folks that see compromised care on the “off” shifts. It is not nice to admit this but the most common response to lapses in calf care by substitute workers is to complain about them. “I told them to feed just enough grain so the calves would finish eating nearly all of it. What did I find on Monday morning? Every grain pail for the youngest calves was nearly full.”

Or, “I told them to watch for calves that were loose. They might need electrolytes in addition to the regular feedings. Half of the time when I come in the next day there are one or two calves that can barely get up due to dehydration.”

How about another alternative? Train, train, train

On one hand, there can be issues with motivation that lead to sub-standard performance. On the other hand, lack of quality calf care often is connected to lack of skills and/or knowledge. That is where training or even re-training fit in.

Step #1: Make training a priority activity

Too often training is ranked so low among possible jobs that it never happens. If quality calf care is important then training of substitute workers needs to be a high priority activity. Accept the fact that some extra wages probably will be needed – keeping in mind the extra costs associated with lapses in calf care quality if training is not done!

Step #2: Set priorities among calf care jobs

Which calf care jobs, if not performed up to standards, result in calves dying or getting sick? Which errors are the most expensive ones to correct? Train first and more frequently for the calf care jobs that pose the highest risk for high performance in the calf enterprise.

Step #3: Decide who is going to do the training

Finding the right person to do the training is not always easy. I recommend using at least these four criteria:

- Has the knowledge and skills needed to follow the protocol and do the job correctly. When explaining the procedures it helps to know the reasons for the specified quantities, times, temperatures, positions, ordering of steps and so on.
- Has good enough “people skills” to avoid making the worker(s) uneasy or frightened causing them to make mistakes.
- Has good enough “teaching skills” to provide effective re-training for workers not following the prescribed procedures [See www.atticacows.com in Calf Facts section for a checklist, “Training Employees to Follow Protocols.”]
- Has ability to communicate clearly about the job in workers own language.

Step #4: Doing the training

I feel most comfortable using a written protocol when preparing a worker to perform a job properly. We read through the protocol together before practicing the job. Then I show the person(s) how to do the steps in the order shown on the page they have in their hand. Then, it is time for the worker to try the procedure – with guidance as needed. After practicing a couple of times most workers can perform the steps correctly. In this setting it should feel very natural to use the protocol as the performance standard. Example activities are mixing milk replacer and washing milk feeding equipment.

Even for tasks like feeding calf starter grain and water a written description often is needed to reinforce verbal instructions. But, there is no substitute for walking the calves and showing the worker how to do the job according to quality standards.

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** 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or **FAX** (585-591-2898) or **e-mail** calvingease@rochester.rr.com with Subscribe as the subject. Back issues may be accessed on the Internet at either www.atticacows.com or www.calfnotes.com and clicking on the link, Calving Ease.

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