

CALVING EASE

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Sam Leadley, Attica Veterinary Associates

“A Stitch in Time Saves Nine.”

- There are always differences between what we plan and what actually happens.
- Finding these differences or deviations when they are small is more profitable than waiting until serious problems surface.
- Consistent monitoring of worker performance identifies these deviations.
- Good worker training helps eliminate these deviations.

Profitability of a dairy calf and heifer enterprise rests in part on key processes being done correctly consistently. For example, most dairies have adopted the protocol of feeding four quarts of clean, high quality colostrum within the first four hours of a calf's life.

However, we all know that there will always be differences between what we plan and what actually happens on a dairy farm. This does not mean that there is some evil person out there plotting to make trouble. Rather, we must remember that workers bring to the job a certain amount of independence of action. And, those workers whose jobs involve animals always have to deal with considerable variation from animal to animal. Thus, we observe departures from the planned procedures or “protocols.”

Identifying Protocol Drift

We often see a gradual departure from planned procedures. Let's call this, “protocol drift.” When training a new calf care person you tell them that each calf receives two bottles of colostrum (2-qt. bottles). They hear you say “Each calf receives two quarts of colostrum.” So they feed one bottle. Oops! Or, consider this calf-feeding example. The farm protocol says that the person mixing milk replacer will use a rapid-read thermometer to monitor the mixing water temperature. Well, someone borrows the thermometer to check the water temperature in the semen thawing heater – but does not return it. Then mixing water temperature is checked using the worker's hand. Then mixing water temperature is estimated using the position of the hot and cold water valves. See how easy it is to “drift” away from the farm protocol?

How do we identify protocol drift? First, we set up a schedule for checking worker performance. Remember, “A stitch in time saves nine.” A regularly scheduled observation is much more likely to pick up small deviations than waiting for a crisis. Or, if you are the person doing the calf care job, pick a regular time for you go over the protocol step-by-step

to check on your own “job performance.” I used to make notes on my utility room calendar as reminders to do this.

Second, before checking worker performance we make certain that it is possible to do the job correctly. Note in the example above, the thermometer was missing. We need to be sure it is either returned or replaced. Then, we can check to see that it is being used properly to check mixing water temperature. For a convenient checklist on how to monitor compliance with protocols see www.calffacts.com, “Monitoring Compliance with Protocols.”

Third, we observe actual employee behavior. It is not acceptable to just talk about intended behavior. “Jan, do you use the rapid-read thermometer to check the mixing water temperature?” Jan replies, “Yes, every time.” This conversation does not represent behavior. As the supervisor you need to be present at the time milk replacer is being mixed. Is the thermometer being used? Is it being used correctly?

I recall watching a worker mixing milk replacer. He ran the hottest water available (170°F) to fill the container half full and added milk powder. He mixed the powder and water. And THEN as cooler water was added to fill the container, he used the thermometer to be sure that the final mix was the proper feeding temperature. If I had not been present when this was happening there is no way I would have picked up this mixing error.

Good Worker Training

Effective worker training depends on knowing how to do the job correctly. What are the steps in the job? What is the proper sequence to do the steps? How is each step done properly?

Many times supervisors carry all of this information around in their head – we just “know” how this job is done on our farm. The most effective worker training is done, however, when we write down the steps in the proper order along with how to do each step. This can be shown to the worker and used during re-training. For a guide on skill training see www.calffacts.com, click on “Training employees to follow protocols: a checklist.” For an example of an effective protocol see www.calffacts.com, click on “Washing Milk Containers: Protocol.”

In the mixing water example, we see that the employee is not monitoring the initial water supply. We need to repeat the information about correct initial water temperature – not higher than 130°F (or what is on the milk replacer bag). It would be best to explain why that temperature is used, especially why higher temperatures are undesirable.

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