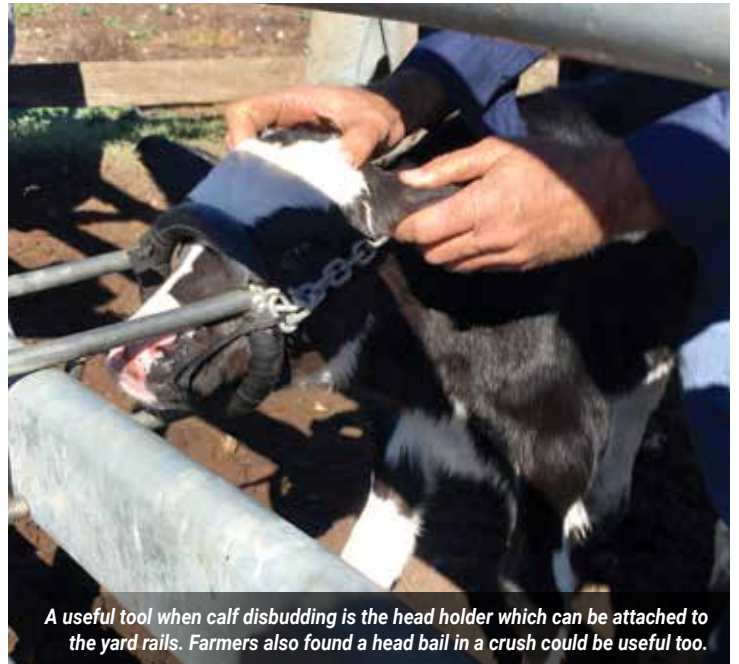


Calf disbudding – managing calf welfare for better growth rates



Belinda Haddow

Subtropical Dairy Extension Co-ordinator Darling Downs and South-east Queensland



A useful tool when calf disbudding is the head holder which can be attached to the yard rails. Farmers also found a head bail in a crush could be useful too.

The Crows Nest and Southern Darling Downs discussion groups met in July to continue their focus on calf rearing and management. As a follow-up to the Rearing Healthy Calves meetings held in their area, the groups chose to invite Dr Justin Schooth, from Gympie Veterinary Services, back to look at the practice of calf disbudding. Many farmers in the groups had attempted calf disbudding in the past, but were discouraged by their low success rates. Justin attended the group meetings and demonstrated the industry best-practice techniques for calf disbudding. Everyone in the group then had the option to practice the technique.

Disbudding is when the horn buds are removed before the horn attaches to the skull, which normally occurs by the time calves reach six to eight weeks of age. Dehorning refers to removing the horns after this age. Dairy Australia encourages farmers to disbud calves before six to eight weeks of age, rather than dehorning cattle at an older age. Dehorning is a more invasive procedure with extra risks of complications, such as infection, fly strike and excessive bleeding.

Disbudding is best performed when the calf is two to six weeks of age. At this age, the calves are robust enough and the

horn bud can be easily felt in the skin, but the horn has not yet attached to the skull.

Studies have shown that calves recover quicker and have less growth check in the days following disbudding if local anaesthetic and anti-inflammatory drugs are used. These drugs are only available upon prescription by veterinarians and their availability may vary in different regions. Discuss some options with your dairy vet on what may be suitable for use on your farm or arrange to have the calves ready when the vet is visiting for herd health days.

'Gold standard' disbudding involves sedation of the calves and cornual nerve blocks using local anaesthetic. This is a veterinary procedure but the extra costs are offset by the advantages. The calves lie down and sleep after they are sedated, which removes all of the stresses for both the calves and operators from handling. Other procedures, such as ear tagging, vaccination and removal of spare teats can easily be done whilst the calves are sleeping. ■■

For more information on providing calf disbudding visit the Dairy Australia calf welfare page www.dairyaustralia.com.au/farm/animal-management/animal-welfare/calf-welfare

These discussion groups are supported from funding from Subtropical Dairy and Dairy Australia.



Getting the theory out of the way before attempting some practical work. Discussion groups give farmers the opportunity to come back together and review the last meeting and also work together to share ideas. The group were able to discuss some changes they had made on farm with calf nutrition and management following the last session.