

Rearing Healthy Calves



Belinda Haddow

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



Recently a round of Rearing Healthy Calves sessions were delivered during February and March throughout the Subtropical Dairy region. Dr Justin Schooth from Gympie Vet Services, Dr Carl Hockey from RuralVet Pty Ltd and Dr Bill Tranter from Tableland Veterinary Services facilitated the on-farm, interactive sessions which focused on the key areas of rearing healthy calves including some relatively small changes that can lead to more productive calves and then heifers in the dairy herd.

The first four hours post-birth are crucial to giving calves a good start to life. An Australian study found that 1/3 of calves coming off their mothers do not have good immunity transfer. The three Qs of colostrum are crucial – Quantity, Quality and Quickly. The target is about getting the highest quality and the right quantity of colostrum fed to the calf as quickly as possible. Colostrum quality can be tested on farm with a Brix refractometer. This inexpensive piece of equipment can ensure that the quality of colostrum is adequate for good immune transfer, particularly if you are storing it for later use.

For farmers who are unsure whether their calves have adequate immunity, their herd veterinarian can do a blood serum level test across a group of healthy calves to give an indication of immunity levels. If immunity levels are good then the system on-farm is working well, however, if serum levels are low then farmers can choose to look at options to improve their rearing practices.

Other areas of calf management and welfare discussed at the on-farm sessions included calf nutrition and weaning, housing, and health management.

The way that calves are cared for on our dairy farms can have long-lasting effects – not just in dairy herds but right throughout the industry. Dairy farmers make decisions every day that can affect the health and welfare of their calves. The Dairy Australia Rearing Healthy Calves manual and online resources (www.dairyaustralia.com.au) is a great resource for refining these decisions and building on the practices already in place to care for calves on farms. ■■