

Bitter experience of the ravages of calf scour

Cork dairy farmer Brian O’Keeffe sees vaccination as an essential component of good calf-rearing

Having experienced a serious problem with calf scour a number of years ago, Cork dairy farmer Brian O’Keeffe regards vaccination of cows prior to calving, combined with colostrum feeding and strict hygiene, as essential components of good calf-rearing.

Brian, who runs a herd of 80 cows at Johnstown, Glanworth, has bit-



Brian O’Keeffe lost 10 calves due to Rotavirus.

ter experience of the ravages wreaked by scour.

“About 10 years ago, we had a terrible outbreak. We lost around 10 calves due to Rotavirus. It was a nightmare experience. No matter what we did, we couldn’t keep them alive.

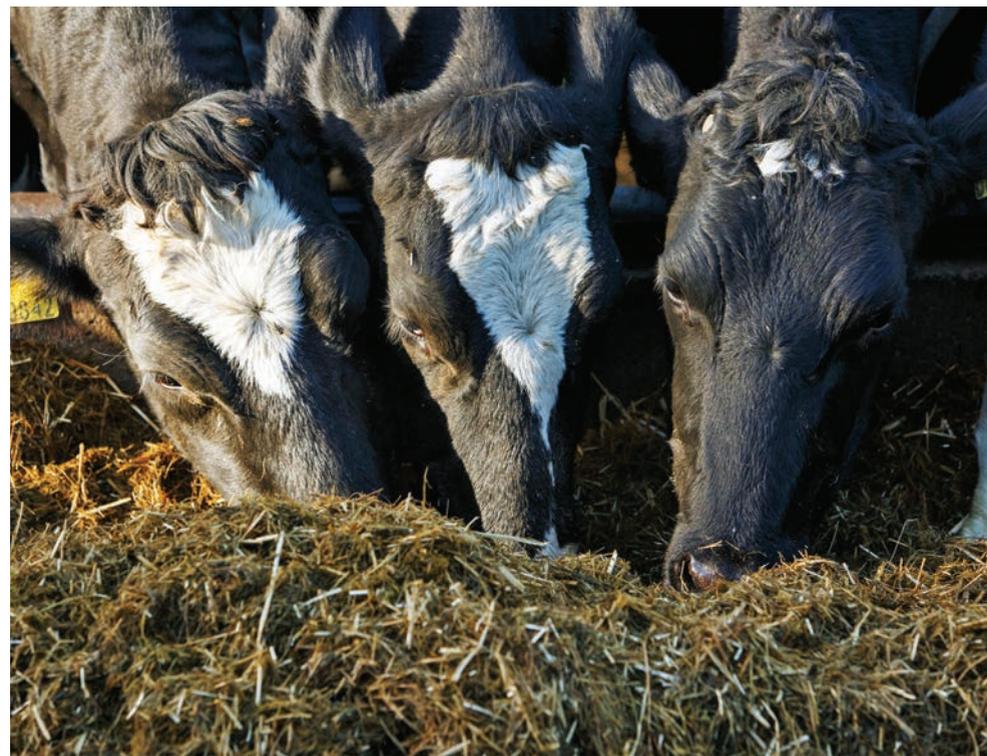
“Every year since then, we have vaccinated the cows against scour. The herd size has doubled since we started vaccinating and we have not lost one calf due to scour,” said Brian. He

is rigid about getting colostrum into calves early. Using a Speedy Feeder, each calf is bottle-fed four litres of colostrum immediately after birth and another four litres within 24 hours. Although a calf born unseen during the night may have sucked, it still gets the four litres through the Speedy Feeder.

He also attaches huge importance to housing and hygiene. A new calf house was built in 2010. The house is cleaned and disinfected after each bunch of calves.

Expansion

Brian took over the farm from his parents, John and Rita, in



Since starting vaccination, the O’Keeffes have not lost a single calf due to scour, even though herd size has doubled.

2009. They were then milking 40 cows. The herd size has since doubled. Yield is now averaging 1,350gals (6,100litres)/cow. Meal feeding is around a tonne/cow.

All calves are reared on the farm. Bullocks are sold as stores at around 16 months

and all heifers not needed for replacements are reared to beef at two years. Brian has Friesian, Hereford and Angus stock bulls.

Calving is due to start next week and the vast bulk of cows will have calved by St Patrick’s Day.

Having doubled cow numbers in recent years, does he plan further expansion? “No, I intend to stick with 80 cows. I could go a bit further in cow numbers but, for lifestyle reasons, I will stick with the mixture of dairying and beef,” he said.

Up to 30 calves lost in an outbreak

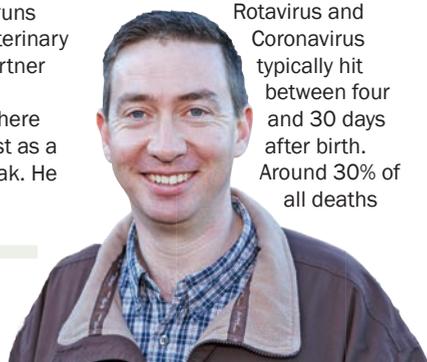
While the number of farmers vaccinating cows pre-calving against scour in calves is increasing each year, there are some farmers who are still willing to take the chance, said Brian O’Keeffe’s veterinary practitioner, Pat Noonan.

“It is only when a farmer hits a problem with scour that the benefits of vaccination become clear,” added Pat, who runs O’Brien and Noonan Veterinary Clinic in Fermoy with partner Conor O’Brien.

He has seen cases where up to 30 calves were lost as a result of a scour outbreak. He

said the one-shot vaccine, given between three and 12 weeks before calving, ensures that the cow’s colostrum contains antibodies that protect against three of the main causes of scour – Rotavirus, Coronavirus and E.coli.

“Calves are at the greatest risk of E.coli infection in the first five days after birth while Rotavirus and Coronavirus typically hit between four and 30 days after birth. Around 30% of all deaths



Veterinary practitioner Pat Noonan pictured on a visit to Brian O’Keeffe’s farm.

under one month are due to scour and Rotavirus is the most common cause.

“Where an E.coli outbreak occurs, it can have lethal consequences on individual farms. Where an outbreak of scour occurs, it is important to establish the cause. This will enable the most effective course of treatment,” said Pat Noonan.

“Scour damages the lining of the gut, resulting in rapid loss of fluids and electrolytes. A scouring calf can lose up to four litres of fluids a day. It is vital that these fluids and electrolytes are replaced and sufficient energy is provided to enable the calf to recover with minimal weight loss. Milk should not be withdrawn while the calf is on fluid therapy,” he advised.

Attention to colostrum crucial

Analysis by the Department of Agriculture’s veterinary laboratories shows that approximately two-thirds of calves that died within two weeks of birth had not received enough good-quality colostrum.

Recent Teagasc research has shown that one-third of dairy herd calves and three-quar-

ters of beef herd calves have less than ideal levels of antibodies, indicating deficiencies with timing, quantity or quality of colostrum feeding.

In further evidence of the importance of colostrum to health and performance, research by the Agri-Food and Bio-Sciences Institute (AFBI) at Hillsborough

showed that feeding inadequate levels of colostrum, or feeding colostrum of poor quality, resulted in calves 23kg lighter at nine months.

“Feeding three litres of good-quality colostrum as soon as possible after birth, and ideally within two hours, is vital for a calf to get the necessary antibodies to protect against disease. The ability to absorb antibodies drops substantially after six hours and is effectively non-existent after 24 hours,” said Catherine O’Leary, veterinary adviser with MSD Animal Health.

Catherine O’Leary says the calf’s ability to absorb colostrum antibodies drops substantially six hours after birth.



Scour problems?

Vaccinate cows now to protect calves against
• Rotavirus • Coronavirus • E.coli K99



In 2013, Department of Agriculture (AIM) figures reveal that 60,369 calves died up to 6 weeks of age. Diarrhoea is the most common cause of mortality in calves up to 4 weeks of age¹

Vaccination of cows at the correct time prior to calving reduces the damage caused by Rotavirus, Coronavirus and E.coli.

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1. Anon 2013. AFBI/DAFM All-Island Animal Disease Surveillance Report 2013 Further information is available from your Veterinary practitioner or MSD Animal Health, Red Oak North, South County Business Park, Leopardstown, Dublin 18. Tel: +353(0)1 2970220.