



Automatic milk feeders – sudden deaths and hygiene risks

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The introduction of automatic calf feeders on to many farms, while having many benefits, is not without its risks.

There have been a number of cases of multiple deaths on farms due to abomasitis (stomach infection) and other associated gastrointestinal upsets. Some of the important bacteria involved in these cases include sarcina or clostridia.

Sarcina are associated with acute abomasal bloat in young calves and lambs, often resulting in sudden death, with the calves found dead.

Affected calves have bloat and other signs associated with abdominal pain, such as kick-

ing at abdomen, rolling and lying stretched out.

It is thought that milk and milk replacer act as an ideal rapidly fermentable growth medium for the bacteria. A number of the clostridial bacteria including *Clostridium sor-dellii* and *Clostridium perfrin-gens* have also been associated with abomasitis in calves and lambs.

Sudden deaths due to abomasal or intestinal torsions (twisted gut) have also been associated with abomasal bloat, due to the large amount of gas produced and the subsequent pain which can cause calves to roll.

The biggest risk factor associated with abomasitis has

been inadequate cleaning of equipment. In the majority of these cases which have been investigated, proper cleaning and disinfection of equipment had not been carried out.

When equipment was cleaned and maintained properly, this had a big impact on numbers of deaths and the number of cases of bloat. Using the recommended milk replacer powder and water levels is also important.

Use of antibiotics, such as for pneumonia, can also increase the risk, as the normal healthy bacteria of the gut are killed off, leaving the calf more vulnerable to an overgrowth of sarcina and clostridium and fungi.

Therefore, use of antibiotics should be kept to a minimum and other preventative measures, eg pneumonia vaccines and proper ventilation, must always be considered.

Automatic feeders are often introduced to help reduce labour requirements on the farm at the busiest time of the year.

This does not mean that proper cleaning and disinfection of equipment is not required. A proper schedule for cleaning and disinfection should be implemented, according to the manufacturer's instructions.

A standard operating procedure for the management of the feeding of calves should be written up in easy to un-

derstand steps and available to all people who are involved in feeding of calves.

In addition, calves must be checked regularly when using automatic feeders, so that sick calves are identified early.

The area around these feeders should be free-draining and regularly cleaned.

Donal Flynn works at All Creatures Vet Clinic, Roscommon Town. All Creatures Vet Clinic is part of XLVets. XLVets is a group of progressive practices who are working together to achieve a better future for agriculture and veterinary in Ireland. For further information, go to www.xlvets.ie.