

Vaccinating against rotavirus rewarded

After decades in the dairying business, Sandy Brown thought he knew all the tricks. But he had to admit defeat on one score: calf scours.

Sandy and wife Fiona run a mixed herd of 120 cows at Finlayson Brook, a few kilometres from Waipu in Northland. The 156 hectares of pasture and 200 hectare block of native bush have been in Fiona's family for more than 100 years – and it felt to the couple that rotavirus scours had been around on the farm for just as long.

Every year, without fail, scours would sweep through the mob of between 35-45 replacements that Sandy and Fiona were rearing. "Some years up to 50 percent of the calves would get scours," Sandy recalls. "It's soul destroying. One minute you've got shiny healthy looking calves and the next minute they're knocked down with scours."

While the Browns always managed to nurse the sick calves through, the scours took a big toll. Costs from veterinary bills, special feed, antibiotics and electrolytes were high. Eventually they gave up raising their own calves altogether, although buying in replacements didn't make good economic sense either.

Tempted back into calf rearing again by better incentives, it wasn't long before the old problem re-emerged, but this time Sandy and Fiona decided to do something more positive about it. On the recommendation of their vet, Stephen McAulay of Waipu Vets, they attended a calf-rearing seminar.

It was the advice of independent calf-rearing expert and veterinarian Bas Schouten about the importance of colostrum feeding – and the benefits of vaccination with Rotavec® Corona – that turned things around last year.

"We vaccinated the whole herd, three weeks before calving," Sandy says. "Instead of just keeping bulk colostrum we separated out the first 24 hour colostrum and made sure all the calves got a feed of this so the antibodies were shared equally. After this we kept the colostrum for the first three to four days and fed this to the calves."

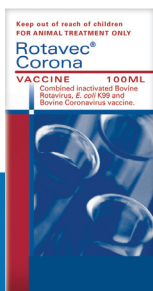
Sandy said the vaccination, supported by careful management of the colostrum, did the trick. "After doing this we only got one very minor case, right towards the end of the season."

It was a big turnaround after previous years. As well as avoiding the heartache and stress of looking after sick calves, the management change made good financial sense, Sandy adds.

"The cost of vaccinating our herd was about \$1200, but that was only about half of our scours-related veterinary bills for the previous season, when we were dealing with calf scours. Financially it was worth every dollar, and psychologically it was very rewarding."

If you're serious about calf rearing and thinking about vaccinating against rotavirus scours, "just do it," Sandy concludes.

*Sandy and Fiona Brown:
Positive action to deal with
calf scours has paid off.*



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Rotavec Corona gives New Zealand farmers the protection they need against calf scours.

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Colostrum a cornerstone of rotavirus vaccination programme.

Which would you rather do: pay a \$5 premium for a calf that has been protected from rotavirus scours through a proper vaccination programme, or risk having to pay \$15 to \$20 a day to keep an unprotected calf alive when it comes down with scours?

That's the attention-focusing question that independent calf-rearing consultant Bas Schouten asks his clients.

It was at a calf-rearing seminar co-hosted with Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health that Bas's advice inspired Northland dairy farmers Sandy and Fiona Brown to have another look at the way they reared their calves – with excellent results (see accompanying article).

Bas says that along with good housing and nutrition, proper colostrum feeding is the cornerstone of a successful calf-rearing venture, whether it be for dairy replacements or the calves sourced for largescale dairy beef operations. And if calves are to be protected from rotavirus scours through vaccination of their dams, proper colostrum feeding is essential.

"Colostrum is a rich source of immunoglobulins and energy and growth factors. It's liquid gold. There's no point just feeding colostrum from the first 24 hours and then selling the rest to make a profit. As far as I'm concerned, that's bad practice."

Bas says that while vaccination against rotavirus scours undoubtedly pays dividends, he doesn't recommend it automatically. "Your vet can advise you on the protocols to suit your property. For example, if you operate a closed herd, with no bought-in stock, the rotavirus risk might be relatively low."

But with the rapid growth in the dairy industry and frequent movement of stock between properties, the risk is often higher, Bas concedes. "Saleyards especially are hotbeds of infection from rotavirus, coronavirus and *Salmonella* among young calves. I advise people who buy large numbers of calves for rearing operations to buy directly from trusted suppliers where there is some certainty that the calves have been properly protected. With calves costing \$150 to \$200, a premium of a few dollars for animals protected by vaccination would be well worth while."

Bas advises those using vaccination not to cut corners. "If you don't do a full programme, you're probably wasting your money. If you're going to vaccinate, do it properly and you'll be raising more valuable calves."

He says that where scours has been occurring, it is essential to get a proper diagnosis to determine the cause. That way the most appropriate veterinary advice can be given.