

Animal Welfare – A Priority For Producing Quality Milk

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I suspect most dairy producers do not associate animal welfare concerns with producing quality milk. Rather, they would most often think of animal health and productivity as the reasons to give attention to how their cattle are housed, handled and managed (their welfare). At the 46th annual meeting of the NMC (National Mastitis Council), Dr. Jim Reynolds, DVM from the University of California at Davis, gave an interesting presentation about why producers should also associate the production of high quality milk and mastitis control with the welfare of their cattle. A summary of part of his comments that were published in the proceedings of the meeting are presented below. They can serve as a guide for dairy producers and their employees as they operate their dairies and care for their cattle with animal welfare concerns being a priority.

What happens to cows outside the milking parlor can greatly affect the quality of milk they produce and their welfare. How they are handled as they are moved to and from the parlor can influence how well they let-down their milk and milk out, and their feed intake when they return to the housing barn. Hitting, yelling at, and rushing the cows are certainly unacceptable practices. The surfaces of the alleys and holding pen can be a concern for cow safety if they are too smooth and cause cows to slip. Cows that are hurried as they are moved often slip more and tend to be more nervous, prone to injury, and subsequently may produce less milk. Furthermore, the milk may be of lower quality because the udders get dirty when the cows fall, and may not get cleaned properly before milking.

The housing conditions the cows live in definitely affect their welfare and the quality of milk they produce. Cows require clean, well bedded stalls of the correct design and size to promote clean udders and reduced teat end bacteria exposure. Cows with cleaner udders and teats should have a lower incidence of udder infection and clinical mastitis. And, those cows will be in better health and feel better, which are certainly welfare concerns.

How cows are handled in the parlor can also greatly affect the quality of milk produced. The milking routine practices that are followed and the operation of the milking equipment are major influences on milk quality. Detecting and properly treating udder infections, properly cleaning the teats before milking, obtaining optimum milk let-down, applying and removing the milking units correctly, and using pre and post milking teat dips are important practices for reducing the incidence of mastitis. Since mastitis is usually a painful inflammation, minimizing the incidence of this disease is certainly an animal welfare concern.

Dr. Reynolds concluded his presentation with the recommendation that dairy producers should have their dairy facilities and husbandry management practices audited by an outside, knowledgeable person to verify that the husbandry of the animals conforms to predetermined standards. While most producers will probably not adopt this suggestion currently, I suspect the time is coming sooner than we may think when such an audit and certification that acceptable animal welfare practices are being followed will be required of all dairy producers. Check out your practices now and be ahead of what is to come.