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## Johne's Disease - Infection in a "Closed" Herd

*Adapted by Alberta Milk staff from The Michigan Johne's  
Disease Control Demonstration Project (MJDCDP)*

Galen Schalk of Hillman, Michigan, had read the reports about Johne's Disease (JD) in dairy herds, but he thought, 'that's not me.' Having a closed herd since 1974, Schalk thought his herd was immune to the problem surfacing in so many other herds. But when he tested his herd as part of the Michigan Johne's Disease Control Demonstration Project, he was surprised to learn that he not only had JD positive animals, but over 20 per cent of his herd tested positive in the first round of testing and jumped to 42 percent the second year.

*"I had heard about Johne's Disease but thought, "That's not me." Galen says. "We have had a closed herd since 1974, so because I was not bringing new animals into the herd, I didn't feel we were at risk."*

Once the presence of JD was identified in the herd, Galen was eager to eliminate the problem as quickly as possible. At the time he was milking 165 cows with a rolling herd average of 26,000 pounds of milk. The area of highest risk on the farm was the use of a manure pack in the calving area. This pack created the perfect environment for organisms to survive and spread to new calves.

The Schalks had already drawn plans for a new transition barn on the farm, but they switched it to be a new maternity area and housing for close-up cows. "It was good that we were already looking to put up a new building, because we really needed a better place to calve the animals," Galen says. The new maternity area also allowed Schalk to use a separate stall for each cow and to clean and disinfect the area between calvings. The Schalks also implemented a program to separate the colostrum of JD positive cows so that it was not fed to new calves.

*"We culled a number of animals in the first two years of the project," Schalk says. "But we still need to manage for the Disease because we know some of the older animals are Johne's Disease carriers."*

Schalk now tags all animals that test positive for JD with a special red neck chain. Any heifers born to a positive dam are also tagged with the red neck chain until they test negative. By visually identifying the JD carriers, Schalk can better manage the Disease and work to keep the Disease from spreading.

With the demonstration project complete, Galen is looking ahead at how he will continue the management practices on his farm. Now that he has the prevalence rate down to less than five per cent he will continue to test the herd to monitor for any new infections.

### **What we learned:**

The Schalk Dairy Farm is an example of how a low level of Disease can erupt into a major problem if not managed. By all accounts, this farm was a closed operation since the 1970's. It is likely the Disease was introduced when the herd was assembled and was being maintained and transmitted at a low level for 30 years.

When the Disease was finally recognized, the number of infected cows, and cows showing clinical signs of JD was rapidly increasing. By the beginning of the MJDCDP, it was estimated that 40 percent of the adult cow herd was JD infected.

Significant risk factors for JD transmission were identified and included:

- a common calving area that was infrequently cleaned,
- calves remaining with their dam for extended periods of time,
- feeding of whole milk, and
- housing of weaned calves near adult cows.

All of these factors were addressed, thus significantly reducing the risk of JD transmission on the farm. In addition, testing

allowed for the identification of JD test positive cattle that were then monitored and prioritized for culling. These changes have led to a dramatic decrease in JD prevalence on the farm and a significant improvement in overall herd health and productivity.

### Lessons Learned:

Although Johne's Disease is most commonly seen in herds that are purchasing cattle, it can become a problem in closed herds, especially when routes of potential transmission are not managed.

Comparing the findings of Schalk Dairy Farm with the results of the farms participating in the Alberta Johne's Disease Initiative (AJDI) we see similar areas of risk and recommendations for management changes. For example, the most common risks based on current management practices as identified by the first 200 participating dairy farms in Alberta are:

- Having purchased animals within the last five years without considering MAP (Johne's Disease) status of the seller farm
- Housing more than one cow in the calving pen at calving, more than 50 per cent of the time
- No restriction of visitor access to any animals

For those same 200 farms participating in the AJDI the most common suggestions for management change, provided by the herd veterinarian, include:

- More rapid removal of the calf from the cow after calving
- Use milk replacer or pasteurized milk for calves
- Use separate equipment for manure handling and feeding
- Only buy cattle from herds with known status
- Have a calving pen
- 

Follow us next month as we share perspectives on the AJDI experience from participating dairy producers and veterinarians.

The Alberta Johne's Disease Initiative (AJDI), a partnership between Alberta Milk and the University of Calgary Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, is designed to help dairy producers minimize the risk of Johne's Disease in their herd. Nearly 50 per cent of Alberta dairy producers have already completed their own Risk Assessment with their herd veterinarian.

If you would like more information about how to complete a Johne's Risk Assessment (which takes about one hour when you do your next herd health visit), please contact your herd veterinarian or Jodi at Alberta Milk, 780-577-3307.



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