IMPROVING WELFARE FOR DAIRY COWS AND CALVES AT SEPARATION

Julie F. Johnsen¹, Kristian Ellingsen¹, Ann M. Grøndahl¹, Knut E. Bøe², Stine M. Gulliksen³, Cecilie M. Mejdell¹

¹ Norwegian Veterinary Institute, Section for disease prevention and animal welfare, P.O. Box 750 Sentrum, N-0106 Oslo, Norway
² Norwegian University for Life Sciences, Department of Animal and Aquacultural Sciences, P.O. Box 5003, N-1432 Ås, Norway
³ Norwegian School of Veterinary Science, Department of Production Animal Clinical Sciences, P.O. Box 8146 Dep., N-0033 Oslo, Norway

Introduction
Separation of cow and calf after a period of suckling breaks the established bond causing behavioural reactions. The intensity and extent of these reactions reflect distress and hence reduced animal welfare. Fence-line weaning allows physical contact after separation (and weaning) (Stookey et al. 1997). The method has been shown to alleviate behavioural responses in beef cattle in the days following separation (Stookey et al., 1997, Price et al. 2001).

Objective
Compare the behavioural reactions of cow and calf of dairy breed (Norwegian Red) following separation (but not weaning) with or without physical contact.

Materials & Methods
The study compared two separation methods (Fig. 1). The barrier between the cows and calves after separation consisted either of an open fence (FL) allowing physical contact between cow and calf, or an opaque, two meter high wall (A), allowing only auditory (and olfactory) contact. Two cow-calf pairs were separated at a time at eight weeks and the test animals were allocated to one of the two treatments. Behaviour of cow and calf was recorded by manual observation using a combination of instantaneous recording every 5th minute and continuous recording for 2x2 hours at day 0, 1, 2, 3 and 4 after separation. Calves were bottle fed 3x2 litres of milk per day after separation and were fed just before observation periods.

Results
Preliminary analyses show that FL significantly reduced high pitched vocalization at day O, 1, 2, 3 and 4 (p<0.05) (Fig. 2). For calves FL also resulted in less alert behaviour including restless walking and more time lying (p<0.001). FL cows rested and ruminated more (p<0.001). Following the days of separation, FL calves resumed behaviour comparable to “baseline behaviour” sooner.

Summary and conclusion
The results indicate that both the intensity and extent of the behavioural reaction to separation is alleviated when cow and calf are separated with physical contact. In dairy herds practicing suckling systems, fence-line separation may increase cow and calf welfare compared to separation into pens allowing merely auditory contact.

Fig. 1. Schematic presentation of the two separation methods: The barrier between the cows and calves after separation consisted either of an open fence (FL) or an opaque, two meter high wall (A).

Fig. 2. The number of high pitched vocalizations (n=16 cow-calf pairs) for days 0-4 following separation with an open fence (FL) or an opaque, two meter high wall (A).

References
Haley, D.B. 2006. Doctoral thesis. The behavioural response of cattle (Bos taurus) to artificial weaning in two steps. Univ. of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.