How do you make a smooth transition from monogastric to ruminant?
Technology may have helped to ease the labour burden of calf rearing for some producers, but are they getting the basics right? We spoke to two nutritional experts from Northern Ireland to find out.

Computerised machines and specialist calf rearers have both eased the heavy labour burden of calf rearing on some units, but the importance of a clear understanding of the fundamentals of calf nutrition and management can never be underestimated. Everyone pays lip service to the importance of feeding colostrum to newborn calves. Colostrum is rich in antibodies, and these are essential for passive immunity.

“Colostrum should be bottle fed or delivered directly to calf’s stomach to ensure consumption by the calf,” says Thompsons Technical Specialist James Black.

The presence of rumen flora is essential for the fermentation of feedstuffs and the synthesis of volatile fatty acids and microbial protein. These are the main energy and protein sources for ruminants. The absorption of the end products of ruminal fermentation is through the papillae in the rumen.

“Today, with the absence of subsidy and the rising cost of skim, it’s a case of identifying a minimum level of skim to achieve optimum performance. Skim milks work by forming a clot in the abomasums. Forming a good clot means better milk digestion and a healthier calf. The quality of ingredients is critical to achieving this desired clot,” says Mr Kelly.

“Whey based CMRs work slightly differently. No clot is formed and instead the key is abomasal emptying rates or rate of passage to the lower gut. This is largely dependent on whey protein type and quality, but also the mineral balance of the milk replacer. Osmotic function neutral environment. However in cold conditions this could be increased to 150g per litre to compensate for increased energy requirements,” says Mr Kelly.

A seamless switch is the key to successful calf rearing

Back to basics

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Irrespective of the chosen system on any unit, he urges all producers to ensure adequate intakes of calf starter concentrates are being achieved as soon as possible to fast track rumen development.

Allison Matthews