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Down but not out [milk fever]

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DOWN BUT NOT OUT

The five-year-old Jersey cow pictured had calved overnight. In the previous year this cow had been the highest producer in the herd, so the farmer was very pleased to see she had produced a heifer calf.

The general appearance of the cow however, rather perturbed him as she was lying with her head back on her shoulder and appeared dopey. A couple of gentle prods followed by a rousing call brought only a slight movement of the head and a dreamy stare. The cow was obviously not well, so the farmer immediately telephoned for professional help.

When examined half an hour later the cow could not sit up without support. Her muzzle was dry and she appeared unaware of her surroundings. Her temperature recorded by using a clinical thermometer was below normal.

Diagnosis
The cow was found to have milk fever, a disease caused by a lack of calcium in the bloodstream and common especially in high producing cows at their third or fourth calving. Calcium deficiency is probably a better name than milk fever as there is no fever, the temperature in fact falls.

Treatment
400 ccs. of a commercially prepared calcium solution were injected under the skin in the neck. The calf was taken away and locked in a calf pen.

Result
Two hours later the cow was still down but appeared brighter. Her neck was extended normally and the muzzle had beads of moisture. A slap on the rump caused her to struggle in an attempt to stand. Further gentle urging and some assistance by lifting at the butt of the tail resulted in the cow rising and walking rather shakily to the water trough for a drink.

That night she was fully recovered and her udder was bulging with milk. To guard against a possible relapse, only a small amount of milk was removed and full milking was not undertaken until the following evening.

Recovery was uneventful, but next year the farmer will be on the alert when the cow calves, as he knows a blood calcium deficiency could occur again, and he has been warned that if treatment is not administered promptly, death could occur.

— F. C. WILKINSON,
Veterinary Surgeon