Cow-calf contact systems for dairy: status of the literature

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Outline

• Pros & cons of cow-calf contact
  ▫ What we expect
  ▫ What we know

• Alternative systems proposed

• What’s next?
Cow-calf separation

Can cheese become more ‘ethical’?
A farm dairy in south west Scotland tries to respond to public criticism by “de-intensifying” the industry.

bbc.com
Expected benefits of early separation

- Protecting calf health
- Getting more saleable milk
- Reducing acute distress at separation
Are these supported by data?

- Improved calf health ✓?
- Increased saleable milk ✗
- Reduced acute distress at separation ✓
Possible benefits of longer contact

- During contact, for calves
  - Affiliative behaviour
  - Reduced abnormal behaviour
  - Reduced response to stressors?
  - Higher growth

Reviewed by Johnsen et al. 2016
Possible benefits of longer contact

- Later behaviour & welfare of calves
  - Improved immune function & health
  - Reduced stress responses & reaction to novelty
  - Appropriate social & maternal behaviour
  - Improved learning, flexibility
Known benefits of longer contact

- **During contact**
  - Affiliative behaviour
  - Reduced abnormal behaviour - cross-sucking
  - Reduced response to stressors
  - Higher growth

- **Later behaviour & welfare**
  - Improved immune function & health
  - Reduced responses to stress & novelty
  - Appropriate social & maternal behaviour
  - More flexibility, improved learning
Alternative systems

- Dam rearing
  - Free, full contact
  - Half-day contact
  - Restricted suckling
- Foster/nurse cows
- Others?
  - Contact for 3 d only?
  - Limited contact e.g. fenceline, cuddle box
What research is needed?

- Overall health effects
  - Controlling Johne’s?
- Long-term effects on behaviour & ability to adapt
- Relative effectiveness of alternative systems
- Effects on cow welfare
  - Foster cows
- Practicalities
  - Monitoring calves, reducing labour, over-milking quarters
Thank you