

BSE - a letter to the editor
by Ron Tanguay, past President
March 27, 1996

Letter To The Editor:

The announcement March 20th by British Health Secretary Stephen Dorrell of the link between BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or mad cow disease) and CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, the fatal human equivalent) comes as a shocking about-face following years of government assurances to the public that beef was safe to consume. Six years ago, British MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE John Gummer fed his four-year old daughter a beefburger on national television in an attempt to protect the British beef industry and reassure the nation. British microbiologist Dr. Stephen Dealler has estimated that, to date, the British public may have consumed 1.5 million BSE-tainted animals — around 80 meals each. With the disease's incubation period ranging from 5-30 years, it is anyone's guess how tragic the end result might be.

But are North Americans who eat beef safe from BSE? I represent EARTHSAVE CANADA (an educational, non-profit organization) which has compiled BSE/CJD data from worldwide sources since 1993. We brought the issue to public awareness in a press conference in 1994. Agriculture Canada has been quick to reassure the Canadian public about our domestic beef herds; but our research would indicate North Americans might well be wary. BSE is a form of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) which appears to have jumped species to cattle from sheep (who have long been infected with scrapie, a TSE) in the early 1980s, likely a result of the meat industry's practice of feeding infected slaughterhouse remains as a "bypass protein" (or rendered animal) supplement, turning cows into not only carnivores, but cannibals. This practice was banned in Britain in 1989, but, incredibly, still continues in North America.

It is possible that a form of BSE is active in North American cattle, resulting in "downer cow" syndrome, where cows arrive at the slaughterhouse too weak to stand and must be dragged to the killing floor. If BSE-infected cattle are present in the food chain, could BSE be spread to other species as it has in Britain? The **FOUNDATION ON ECONOMIC TRENDS** in Washington, DC reported that in 1985, an outbreak of transmissible mink encephalopathy was discovered at a mink ranch in Wisconsin. The mink's diet consisted of 95% "downer cows" and 5% horse meat. In 1993 the USDA stated that "over 1200 [cattle] brains have been examined and data recorded from May 1990 through December 1993. To date there has been no evidence of BSE." The compelling question remains unanswered: *What was the source of the encephalopathy outbreak among the Wisconsin mink?*

In 1994, **AGRICULTURE CANADA** slaughtered an entire Alberta cattle herd after it had confirmed infection by BSE. The Canadian Government assures us that having eradicated an entire herd, no BSE-infected cattle remain in Canada. Given the long incubation period of the disease, how valid is the Canadian Government's assurance?

Research has not yet shown whether BSE can or cannot be transmitted through dairy products. What we do know is that many of the farmers in Britain who have died from ' were dairy farmers. Significant or coincidental?

If BSE is present in North American beef, would it not begin to show in increased cases of CJD in humans? The Ministry of Health confirms that since 1985, 28 people have died from CJD in British Columbia. We have an unsubstantiated report of six cases of CJD at one Lower Mainland hospital alone, (three confirmed by post-mortem autopsy and three suspected). This apparent high incidence locally requires serious investigation. There is concern among some members of the scientific community that some deaths by CJD may go misdiagnosed as Alzheimer's (with similar dementia symptoms). The actual number of CJD cases in North America would be boosted dramatically by even a small percentage of misdiagnosed cases reported as Alzheimer's.

In light of these unanswered questions, caution is warranted on the part of North Americans. If this whole issue moves us to ask more questions about the source and quality of the food we eat, it will have served a valid purpose. Our current intensive agriculture practices, attempting to improve on nature whether through genetic engineering, "factory farming" using growth hormones and antibiotics, and now turning herbivorous cows into cannibals have a calamitous, as-yet-incalculable cost.

As if this weren't enough! The resources of the planet its ability to feed us are in jeopardy. Much less land is required to support a plant-based diet than a diet based on animal products. It is estimated by Francis Moore Lappe and other organizations researching these issues that, on average, three and one-quarter acres of land can feed only one person on a meat-based diet for one year. The same area will support twenty people on a plant-based diet! In the '90s we are continuing to add between 90 and 100 million new human beings to the planet yearly. A diet based on plant foods is both appropriate and increasingly necessary if we are to continue to be able to feed ourselves.

With the current beef scare, many people may opt instead to increase their consumption of chicken, pork and fish. But many of the same industry practices that may have created BSE in cattle are being used on pork, poultry and "farmed" seafood.

Meat, eggs and milk products are linked to the diseases of western, affluent countries. The typical western diet, high in fat and cholesterol, is implicated in heart disease, strokes, adult-onset diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity and many forms of cancer. Recognizing that simply cutting out red meat from one's diet is not sufficient, we are finding a significant growth in the number of people shifting toward a completely plant-based diet. The power of prevention through dietary change will have a most favorable impact on our health care costs. And on the way each of us feels!

Ironically, the shocking news from Britain came on North America's national "Meatout" day (March 20th) a day encouraging the nation to give up meat for at least one day and discover the health, environmental and ethical benefits of doing so.

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