

An exchange of letters on the Mad Cow Disease (BSE) crisis

23 July 1998

The following e-mail to the editor of the WSWs from Professor J.W. Almond, a member of the British government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), concerns the coverage on the WSWs of the BSE, or Mad Cow Disease, crisis.

Some of Professor Lacey's claims are not supported by hard evidence and are wildly speculative. For example the over thirty months scheme does not 'hide' cases. It merely dictates that only animals below that age are eaten. Anything over that age can still be used for milk and for breeding (and hence stays on the farm) but when the animal gets to the end of its productive life it is slaughtered and incinerated (previously such animals were also eaten). The farmer is compensated for the animal whether or not it develops BSE.

There is no evidence to support the assertion that BSE is spread from contaminated grassland. There is much evidence that supports the view that it is not.

Please check your facts with independent scientists before posting on the www. A balanced view is more respectful to your readers.

Jeff Almond

Member of SEAC

25 Jun 1998

Barbara Slaughter replies on behalf of the WSWs

The explanatory footnotes have been added for publication.

Dear Professor Almond:

Thank you for your letter to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the important question of the BSE crisis.[1] You write that some of Professor Lacey's claims 'are not supported by hard evidence and are wildly speculative. You specifically object to the allegation that the Over-30-Months-Scheme 'hides' cases of BSE and that BSE is spread from contaminated land.

Professor Lacey is capable of speaking for himself on the scientific basis of his views, but the issues you raise are crucial. They revolve around an understanding of the extent to which BSE continues to threaten human health. Allow me to cite the grounds for our own concerns.

The Over-30-Months-Scheme is aimed at eradicating cattle

over this age from the food chain. Yet no scientific case has been presented why cattle under 30 months represent no danger to human health, but do so above that age. As the incubation period for BSE is up to four years, we do not know how many animals entering the human food chain are incubating the disease.

An article in the June 13, 1998 issue of *New Scientist* reported findings of an investigation into subclinical cases of BSE in Swiss cattle, which showed that 4.5 per thousand apparently healthy animals from herds where BSE had occurred were carrying the disease. The article calculates that if this pattern holds true for the British herd, the number of cattle carrying the disease here could be as many as 450,000 for last year alone.

Professor Collinge expressed serious concerns about this matter in his evidence to the Labour government's BSE Inquiry.[2] He pointed out that Clare Tomkins, who died from Human BSE, had been a strict vegetarian since 1985, which means that she must have been exposed to the disease at its preclinical stage. Such considerations make him extremely anxious that we are going to see a lot more cases. He told the inquiry that he was very concerned about the question of subclinical disease, adding that it had always surprised him that out of a herd of one hundred cows only three or four animals would succumb. He thought it likely that only a small proportion of animals infected actually went on to develop the clinical symptoms.

Regarding the question of danger from the environment, I am not aware of any tests that have been conducted to see whether BSE can be spread from contaminated grassland. Unfortunately you do not cite the evidence on which you base your own assertions in either case.

Given what we do know about BSE-type diseases, it seems advisable to err on the side of caution. Experiments in this country and in America have shown that prion proteins, widely held to be the infective agent, are incredibly resistant and can survive for long periods in the ground. In Iceland, in the 1950s, the authorities attempted to eradicate sheep scrapie by slaughtering all the infected flocks and introducing scrapie-free stock. Within a few years the

disease had returned, and it was thought that the infectivity had persisted in the environment.

Similar experiments on BSE-infected cattle have not been carried out in this country. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has refused to provide epidemiological data to Dr Stephen Dealler and other scientists, including members of Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC),[3] and therefore there is little known about the distribution of BSE. We know that cases are occurring in herds that have already suffered infection. This indicates maternal transmission, but infection from contaminated ground--and other environmental sources--cannot be ruled out. It is an area where research is urgently needed.

Your letter also raises another important question--how to proceed on such matters in the absence of 'hard evidence'. We would contend that safeguarding human health must always be the priority. This has not been the case with BSE. In fact, the absence of 'hard evidence' was cited for years as proof that no threat existed.

Even when dangers became apparent, these were deliberately downplayed to protect the profits of the beef industry. Science and scientists were manipulated by the government and the agri-businesses to present as 'fact' that which suited their own agenda. Research into BSE was stopped or deliberately held-up. Those who questioned the government's line were vilified, moved or sacked.

The BSE crisis has highlighted the real dangers to scientific 'independence' when research and opinion is suppressed for commercial reasons. As a member of the government Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, you gave first-hand experience of this manipulation in your evidence to the Canterbury Mills Inquiry[4] in February last year. You explained how SEAC arrived at their assessment of the species barrier between cattle and humans as 'one to a thousand'. You said that you personally believed it should have been 'one to one', but said 'If we had used one to one, we would have had to live with the consequences that eating beef was dangerous. So we reluctantly arrived at a consensus on the basis of evidence that does exist--a best guess.... There were huge economic implications if we were out one way or the other.'

The government used this statement to claim that their scientific advisors had assured them that beef was safe and SEAC went along with this. When economic concerns outweigh concern for human health, there can be no genuine scientific independence.

Yours sincerely,
Barbara Slaughter
July 21 1998
See Also:

Human BSE - Anatomy of a Health Disaster

New book on BSE widely praised

[27 March 1998]

Damning testimony in government inquiry into BSE crisis

[27 March 1998]

Footnotes

1. Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), commonly known as Mad Cow Disease, is a disease of cattle that attacks the brain of the infected animal. It has a relatively long incubation period, but in its later stages it results in the disintegration of the brain tissue and causes rapid descent into dementia and death. At present there is no treatment for the disease.

BSE is one of a group of diseases called spongiform encephalopathies. Several other species are vulnerable to infection, including sheep, cats, marmosets, mink and others. BSE was first identified in Britain in 1986. It developed very rapidly and in 1994 there were 25,000 confirmed cases, although the true figure was probably much greater.

In 1996 a human form of BSE was identified. It is thought that the disease had crossed the species barrier from cattle to humans and that the source of the infection was eating BSE-infected beef.

2. The government BSE Inquiry began in March 1998. Its terms of reference are to 'establish and review the emergence and identification of BSE and its human equivalent, and of the action taken in response to it up to March 20 1996....'

3. The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee was set up by the Tory government to advise them on the incidence of all spongiform encephalopathies, including BSE, sheep scrapie and Human BSE.

4. The Canterbury Mills Inquiry was held in February 1997. It involved an appeal by a small rendering plant, near Canterbury, for permission to pour effluent from the rendering of cattle remains on to land around the factory. The factory is directly over a water aquifer and local residents were concerned about the dangers of BSE infection entering the water table. The results of the inquiry have not yet been made public.



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