

# **BSE — Mad Capitalists Disease**

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For several years the BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) crisis has been simmering away, boiling over into a tabloid fuelled food scare with frightening frequency. The recent piece of legislation when all beef on the bone was banned from sale is only the latest in a long line of panic measures from politicians.

The actual reasons for BSE, and if it can be passed to humans, is poorly understood, even by the so-called experts. I certainly can't answer these questions either, though it seems at the moment that the risk is very small. But what I can do is look at the disastrous way this crisis has been handled and the incompetence and greed of the politicians, scientists, farmers and media.

## **BSE and government**

BSE first came to public attention way back in the days when John Gummer was still Minister of Agriculture. The government adopted the standard 'deny everything' line so we were told BSE posed no risk to humans and Gummer arranged for cameras to film him force feeding his children beef burgers to prove the point. Not surprisingly few people were convinced by this and British beef was quickly banned from being sold overseas. A lot of money was then put into investigating BSE and the Scientists quickly reached the conclusion that it was the bovine (i.e. cow) form of Scrapie a brain disease which has affected sheep for hundreds of years. How cows came to be suffering from this was explained by the fact that the cows were actually eating feed made from sheep carcasses (and in fact cow carcasses as well). Cheap and high in protein maybe but obviously not the best food for herbivores. Cows are now fed such large amounts of protein that they can't digest it all and it is absorbed directly from the gut. The theory was that the cows were absorbing a type of protein called Prions from sheep infected with Scrapie when they ate feed made from sheep. This prion then travelled from the cow's digestive system to the brain and caused the disease. The first outbreaks of BSE could also be shown to have happened after Thatcherite deregulation had relaxed the controls on how sheep were turned into cow food. This theory fitted the facts well but what has never been made clear is just how little is understood about it.

## **Science**

Prion proteins are found in the brains of animals suffering from diseases like Scrapie and BSE; and in people suffering from Kuru (the disease found in cannibals who have eaten human brains) and Creutzfeldt Jakobs Disease (CJD). No infectious organism has ever been found to cause these so the theory is that the prion proteins themselves cause the infection. No mechanism for how this happens has been put forward though. So far as today's science can tell all proteins replicate through the use of DNA or RNA templates, even in the smallest of viruses. The prion theory therefore proposes some new, as yet unknown, way of protein replication. This has not, however, stopped it becoming the accepted explanation for BSE and almost all scientific investigation has been based on this starting point. Alternative explanations, such as that organo-phosphate pesticides (chemically closely related to nerve gasses) were to blame has been ignored. It may well be that this theory is incorrect but it deserved more examination than it got. The fact that despite farmers claiming for many years to have suffered severe side effects from using organo-phosphates they have consistently been declared safe might have something to do with this.

Another theory that small and hard to detect spiroplasma bacteria are the cause has similarly been ignored.

## **Research**

The funding for scientific research is now very tightly controlled and 'pure research' when something is investigated so it can be understood better is almost non-existent. To receive funding definite practical applications have to be the aim of modern research. This, of course, means scientists are always in the business of emphasising the importance of their work, and in the case of food safety research, the dangers of eating all types of food and thus the need for more research into food safety.

So, back to the prion theory. As prions are little understood there is a lot of mileage that scientists can get out of this and reports started to trickle out that humans may be susceptible to the agent that causes BSE. The media (who know a food scare makes great headlines and boosts sales), and the scientists (always on the look out for more funding) impressively over hyped this. The politicians reacted with desperate panic measures. The governments Chief Veterinary Officer and his deputy tried to censor conclusions they didn't like and a law was passed that brains and spinal cords had to be removed from beef carcasses. Quite how this was supposed to protect the public is not made clear. If cows get BSE from prion proteins in feed passing through the digestive system to the brain via the blood stream then surely the prion will be present all over the cow. The latest scare that blood donated by people with new variant CJD (nvCJD) might be infections illustrates this point.

Despite pleading from a succession of ministers other countries refused to lift the ban on British beef (leading to deranged little Englanders proudly displaying "eat British beef" car stickers). Strict control were put in place about what could go into animal feed and a mass slaughter policy was stated, with of course compensation to the farmers (expected to cost at least £3.5 billion) which continues to this day. The number of cattle infected with BSE has now started to decline though it has remained a stubbornly persistent disease.

It's now over ten years since BSE was first discovered and after all this time and expenditure the disease is still in cattle and we still understand very little about the possible dangers to humans. But one thing we can be clear on is that in a world not driven solely by the profit motive this crisis would never have occurred.

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