

# How Now, Mad Cow ?

## Practical Solutions Can Help End Canada's Wilful Blindness on Mad Cow Disease

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For the **Calgary Herald**

May 26, 2003

Mad Cow disease, or its scientific name Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), is a fatal brain-wasting disease in cattle which was first identified in the United Kingdom in 1986. No one knows for sure how the first cow (or cows) got BSE, but we know it spread throughout Britain and eventually the world through the cannibalistic practice of making cattle feed out of the bits of cattle (offal) that are not fed to humans. Like a "chain-letter", offal from a Mad Cow infected many more cattle and offal of those cattle infected many more.

New variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) -- or "human Mad Cow disease" -- is also a fatal brain-wasting disease. Early in the illness, patients usually experience psychiatric symptoms, which most commonly take the form of depression or, less often, a schizophrenia-like psychosis. Neurological degeneration, including unsteadiness, difficulty walking and involuntary movements, occurs as the illness progresses. By the time of death patients are completely immobile and mute.

It is widely accepted in the scientific community that the most likely cause of vCJD is from exposure to the BSE agent via "dietary contamination by affected bovine central nervous system tissue", or in more simple terms, from eating infected meat. According to Mad Cow disease expert Dr. Steven Dealer, like cattle, thousands - perhaps millions - of people may have been infected before the disease was first identified in 1996. Because no one knows the length of the incubation period in humans, which is currently speculated to be as long as 40 years, it is uncertain how many people will ultimately be infected.

### Is Canada Safe From Mad Cow disease?

According to British customs figures, more than 200,000 tons of potentially contaminated feed were exported around the world. The UK Sunday Times reported that Prosper de Mulder, Britain's largest rendering company, exported potentially contaminated material to Canada. In a worldwide alert the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation reported that meat and bone meal from Europe was imported by more than 100 countries since 1986, including Canada. Cases of BSE have since been confirmed in cattle in Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Liechtenstein, Italy, Belgium, Greece, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Finland, Austria, Israel and Japan.

Statistics Canada documentation shows that between 1990-2000 Canada continued to import potentially contaminated blood meal, meat scraps and waste meat from the United Kingdom and European countries. Shockingly, over 2.8 million kilograms of this potentially contaminated material was imported after 1996 - after it was established that humans could contract vCJD from eating infected meat. This contradicts claims by Agriculture Minister Lyle Vanclief, who categorically denies that Canada ever imported bone meal from countries known to have Mad Cow disease. Is Minister Vanclief lying or is he being misled by his advisors?

Alberta actually imported a live cow with Mad Cow disease back in 1993. The Canadian government raced to destroy the "Mad" cow, along with more than 400 other cattle from the same herd, but some cattle slipped

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Canada's very serious food problem? What should Canada do about mad cow disease? An exclusive listing of solutions for mad cow disease. The secret that government officials should be keeping hidden from the public is that...

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through the cracks. A report by the European Union's Scientific Committee noted that "eleven imported cattle that were found to be carrying a risk of being infected [with BSE] entered the Canadian food or feed chain".

In 2000, Canada tested 900 cattle for Mad Cow disease. That is less than 0.0001% of Canada's beef cattle herd which numbers 11,000,000. To put this in perspective, European countries were testing thousands of cattle per week in an attempt to detect and eradicate the horrific disease. According to Michael Hansen, a Mad Cow expert with the Consumers Union in New York, governments insist they have erected a "firewall" against Mad Cow disease, but in reality it's "more like a white picket fence." In 2001, Hansen told the Canadian media: "I would predict that if they tested enough animals (in Canada) they would find a positive."

### **What Should Canada Be Doing?**

Government must immediately implement an exhaustive testing regime for identifying Mad Cow disease. By only testing a 900 cattle a year we are putting Canadians at risk. Like several European countries we should be testing thousands of cattle a week.

Canada should immediately ban meat and bone meal from entering the food chain. Cows are not cannibals - they are herbivores and should not eat other animals. While it is often reported that Canada has banned cattle-to-cattle feeding practices, this simply isn't true. Under Canadian law it is legal for cattle to be fed a diet derived from mammal "blood, gelatin, rendered animal fat or their products." In other words, cattle materials (like blood and fat) are still making their way into cattle feed. It is also legal for pigs and chickens, fed on rendered cattle materials, to be rendered and fed back to cattle. This practice must be stopped immediately. In a British experiment, a pig injected with brain material from a BSE cow contracted a TSE. Furthermore, feed mix-ups do happen and sometimes cattle eat other animals feed. According to William Leiss, President of the prestigious Royal Society of Canada, the federal government should implement a full ban on such feeding practices. "Stop recycling animal protein," said Mr. Leiss. "All of it. Period. That's the answer, because of what we know."

The Canadian government should heed recommendations from the World Health Organisation and immediately legislate a total ban on rendered animal protein in livestock feed. If there are more cases of Mad Cow disease in Canada, this precautionary measure will prevent it from spreading further.

Shockingly, the carcass of Canada's recent case of Mad Cow disease was sent to a rendering facility where it entered the animal feed chain. This is in direct violation of a 1996 WHO recommendation that states: "No part or product of any animal which has shown signs of a TSE should enter any food chain (human or animal)". This dangerous behaviour must stop immediately. Why are government regulators taking such reckless, avoidable risks?

It is still common practice for "road-kill" deer and elk to be sent to the rendering plant to be processed into animal feed - despite the fact that government regulators have documented thousands of Canadian elk and deer with Chronic Wasting Disease -- a close cousin of Mad Cow disease. This dangerous practice must also be banned immediately.

During the height of the global Mad Cow outbreak, officials from Health Canada and the CFIA met behind "closed-doors" with cattle industry representatives to discuss the Mad Cow epidemic. Refusing to allow public health advocates attendance in the meeting illustrates the collusion between government regulators and the regulated. To paraphrase Justice Horace Krever, who led the investigation into the tainted blood disaster, "Health Canada must regulate in the public interest, not in the interest of the regulated."

### **Warning: System Failure**

Despite the reality that Mad Cow disease is spreading around the world, federal regulators did not take preventative measures to protect Canada. The willful blindness that characterized Health Canada's approach to the handling of the hazard of blood contamination in the past is clearly being repeated today. Has the Canadian government not learned anything from the British experience? Unfortunately, no. Instead of basing their policies on a worst-case scenario, they placated industry and hoped for the best. To quote the memorable words of British epidemiologist Sheila Gore, the British government was playing "Russian Roulette with no information on the odds." Let's not let history repeat itself.

***Bradford Duplisea is an independent Ottawa-based researcher who often works on health care and food safety issues for the Canadian Health Coalition.***