

The appliance of science

Published 21st May 2001

On entering the room at a plush venue in London a vet from Devon was greeted with the cheery greeting 'good to see you but what are you doing in this neck of the woods?' 'I've come to get away from the smoke' was the dour reply. From the smoke to The Smoke.

Unfortunately this is too close to the truth. It has taken time for the pyres to be built and many people who were unaffected by the disease directly have now become involved. And so the tally of involvement rises from a thousand or so farmers with deadstock in the county to several thousand motorists and residents smelling the aftermath. One more infected farm yesterday and it is twenty days since the worst county day. This disease is still very much with us.

It is difficult to be completely accurate, because of the distribution of fields belonging to a holding, but taking the farmhouse location the nearest the virus came to the Home Farm is three miles. That was some six weeks ago. The cows are now grazing the pasture, sheep and unwanted bovines are being sent for slaughter and effort is being directed into work on the land. Tractors are going back and forth for the spring pilgrimage to collect fertiliser from the merchants. The use of AI has expanded to group insemination at one visit by an inseminator following synchronisation and a semen syringe for individual cows applied by the farmer. A low conception rate is seen as better than no conception at all.

Local authorities and land managers are reviewing access for the public but farmers are unsure about the standards they need to apply. What should farmers fear from increased movement in the countryside and what should they ignore? The talk is of bio-security but this would appear to need a strong application of science and knowledge of the virus.

One local farmer has a council track separating his fields from a building development. People are walking along the track to view where the houses are. After protracted arrangements he obtained permission to move his sheep to another field, on welfare grounds, that involved crossing the track. He was animated that if people walked up the track on the same day that the sheep were to be moved that his licence would be revoked. Consequently he spent the day asking people not to walk up the track. By the end of the day a great deal of nervous energy was used up with neighbours and all and sundry involved. Fortunately it was a wettish day so less people ventured forth.

A large estate locally is concerned about contact between people and deer. This is a concern oft repeated. Deer do what deer do in the woodland. People walk through the woodland. Assuming that one or more deer has FMD are the people likely to come in contact with the virus? What precautions should someone take? But deer may not be contracting this strain of FMDV, although there is a theoretical possibility. Most farms locally have deer grazing their land. Are they friend or foe?

Concerns over wildlife do not extend to rats. Pictures on the television of piles of dead sheep and cattle being picked over by rats and jackdaws are disconcerting. Once a pyre is lit the vermin presumably disperse. The poisoning of rats, with incineration of bodies, would

appear to be a worthwhile activity but this is not uppermost in local minds. It is the people who see themselves as a threat.

Within village communities there has been a development for the healthy and unhealthy to take from a meander to an outright run on a daily basis. These trots are around the lanes, past farmland and in more open times along footpaths. Generally these have come to a halt because people are sensitive to any concerns that a farmer might have. It does not extend to the degree of concern from a carrier who 'phoned from away, before making a farmhouse delivery, just to check that if he went to the wrong place he 'wouldn't be shot'.

It is likely that bio-security will decrease at a time when there is a technical need for more vigilance. Highways authorities and the police are objecting to disinfected mats and straw being place on public roads. It seems that someone fell off their motorbike and is claiming from the council. Many local farms have buildings on either side of a lane and vehicles effectively drive through the livestock areas. Soon the contractors will be attending to shearing, dung spreading and grass hauling for silage. Local farmers have been encouraged to shed machinery and take to contracting. How will bio-security between farms be maintained?

As the virus is believed to be held in the sheep and released through the cattle farmers are happy with field boundaries and interaction with neighbours who have both sheep and cattle together. If the cattle aren't showing disease now then it is assumed that the sheep are virus free. It is feared that there may be dangerous contacts in the coming weeks but the practical way forward is thought to be to manage bio-security in partnership with neighbours rather than in isolation. Time will tell if the precautions are successful.

Richard can be contacted by Email: rga@agmed.freeserve.co.uk

Richard Gard
3rd May 2001