

Human awareness.

Published 2nd July 2001

Whatever the topic under discussion my neighbours can call on information sources that rival the Internet. Newspapers, books, journals and the television all have their place but if you really, and I mean really, want to know what is happening in the countryside ask a farmer with outlying cousins.

To the south the infected areas are being realigned steadily but rapidly. There is talk of Dartmoor being put outside the infected area as defined by the major roads. This will be welcomed by walkers and it will be interesting to see what contact is acceptable with roaming livestock. The county newsletter has attempted to allay fears of a mass cull of sheep to reduce the task of surveillance. The numbers of available trucks, army personnel, seconded staff and slaughtermen have all been reduced. About one hundred vets have returned to their practices or been redeployed. Even surplus coal deposits and railway sleepers are being forwarded to a national centre.

It is with some amusement that the story is related of the official sent to watch the silage being carted on an infected farm to make sure the wagons didn't use the lane. It was a nice sunny day and he didn't seem to mind missing the daily stress payment he would have received for answering the telephone back in the office. Maybe if the calls came through to a mobile, while sitting in the hedge with a flagon of cider and some bread and cheese, a more mellow approach to problems would be taken. A mellow approach was needed when the slaughtermen and the army turned up at the wrong address but the same surname. Local awareness nil. Farmer stress total.

Practical matters dominate daily activity. Within the infected area there is a shortage of killing capacity for old ewes and a wait of eight weeks is not unusual even with incentives. When infected area boundaries are considered it may be the location of abattoirs that defines the line as well as geography. An infected area without killing capacity within its boundaries is a difficult proposition. As the line is drawn some farmers believe that the needs of the many within the area outweigh the needs of the few, who suffer extended infected area status for their farm.

An eagle eyed official insisted that the farmer who spilt slurry from his tanker spent two days cleaning and disinfecting the road. The villagers were none too pleased with the detour while the job was done. How many such spillages have gone un-noticed?

To the north a fresh outbreak of FMD has shaken the local community. The general feeling has been that the virus has passed by and if only the administrative difficulties would be withdrawn everyone would be able to get back to some sort of normality. But not now. Not when the talk today is of over four thousand animals slaughtered, another five thousand to be taken out as contiguous and a whole community being reduced to empty fields. The original scorched earth policy.

Few doubt the need for the wipeout. The grapevine reports that when the contiguous sheep were examined old lesions were found. Once again it is believed to be the cattle that showed

the first noticeable signs. How did the infection get to this clean area? That is the question that is being debated. The role of deer is still believed to be a factor despite the official negative tests. Few farmers are able to shoot deer with a rifle, although they probably know a man who can. When the slaughtermen were on site the farmer saw a deer in his field drooling from the mouth and looking pretty sick. He asked the rifleman to cull it for blood testing. Unfortunately by the time a meeting had been convened and permissions obtained the deer had moved on. A lost opportunity perhaps to investigate an important technical point.

For those only viewing this disease on the television it may be difficult to understand the restricted life that some farmers have endured in the hope of keeping the disease out. No-one leaving or entering the farm. Food delivered to the farm gate. This approach has not guaranteed freedom from the disease. Maybe some security aspects were emphasised too much with other aspects overlooked. They did what they thought was for the best.

The lack of direct human contact outside of the immediate family has led to a re-evaluation of what is and what is not important. Farm animals do promote a need to care. For those who view farmers as unfeeling animal exploiters this crisis has shown the other emotional side. This has made vets, who count these farmers as friends as well as clients, to look more closely at what they do and how they approach their work. The impact of a veterinary decision causes tears to be shed. A combination of science with human awareness defines the best of veterinary practice.

Footnote:

The practice at Tiverton is developing closer telephone links with farmer clients now that Andy Biggs has a few months of inactivity. Andy was hit by his own car, while standing next to it using the 'phone, as another car ploughed into his at speed. All Andy remembers is the roof coming towards him and a sensation of flying. He has had operations on his leg and he will be more communicative when the pills wear off. We wish him a speedy recovery.

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