

No pitchforks at the church.

Published 27th August 2001

The big news is that from August 1st, Devon, Cornwall and Somerset have been declared infection free. In Devon one third of the culled cattle came from 173 infected premises and one quarter of the sheep. Overall three times as many animals were culled on contiguous or other premises than were culled on infected premises. There is some confusion about the number of holdings involved with a figure of fifteen hundred mentioned in despatches. It is probably more significant for the rural community that only 12% of the holdings culled out are recorded as infected premises.

The Devon Young Farmers Clubs are holding their first gathering since February. This will take the form of a dance at the Devon County Show. The mating rituals of the young farmers are well tried and tested and it is possible that there will be fewer local weddings next year as a result of the virus. This is a form of symbiosis perhaps. Virus affects livelihood and restricts fraternisation, money saved on wedding.

It is unlikely that saving money on weddings was one of the considerations for the people who have been reported throwing infected pieces of cattle onto uninfected farms. What is the penalty for deliberately attempting to spread the virus? A week in the stocks perhaps. The fine for walking a closed footpath is £5000, so it has to be more than that.

Even though acts of bio-terrorism have been reported from far away counties it has prompted considerable local discussion. The story seems to be shifting from farmers wanting the disease to get compensation, on to expansion of the infected area to prolong embarrassment for the politicians and then to slaughterers reluctant to lose their culling income. All this is bordering on fantasy land for the family farms, simply wanting to get back to the seasonal order of farming life.

It is worrying to consider that the spread of the virus has been said to have followed the licensed movement of sheep. The difficulties of detecting FMD by physical examination, particularly in the absence of proper handling facilities, has been discussed over the past weeks. Farmers, who believe their stock to be at risk, are questioning that, if examination on one day is not a sure way of certifying absence of the disease, then, how can animal movements be permitted? Of the thousands of licenses issued by vets, it seems important to identify how many of the animals, passed as clear, subsequently had the disease.

The Rural Stress Information Network at Stoneleigh has reported that they received more calls from distressed people each month in 2001 than they received in the whole of last year. This is in addition to the regional calls. One of the important lessons has been the need for debriefing and mutual support for all those involved with the helplines. This follows the Samaritans model where the helpers are known to need help and support themselves. Where does this leave vets?

I have been present on two separate occasions when vets in practice have asked other vets not to talk about FMD at social gatherings. Those around have immediately responded and the conversation has moved on to lighter topics. What, if anything does this mean? Is it a

sign of stress, or boredom or simply wanting a relaxing social time. But usually vets seem only too willing to talk about their work and their practice. The usual way to eek out problems is to talk to other vets. Maybe the overburdening nature of FMD has swamped the normal outlets. There is The Veterinary Surgeons' Health Support Programme available on 01926 315119. I rang the number but unfortunately only retrieved the answerphone. As the chant goes What do we want? When do we want it? Now.

The local agricultural colleges and other training organisations are concerned about a shortfall in students for land based courses. They are launching an initiative to advise people about 'current opportunities for careers in the countryside'. It is anticipated that 'FMD will lead to a situation where many who have worked in farming will require retraining to adapt to new work opportunities'. One new opportunity is in the development of action plans. It seems that the advisory agencies have plans to produce schemes to produce action plans to develop more schemes. It is likely that many farming families will have very full waste paper baskets shortly. As one speaker at a revival conference observed 'down to earth folk are wary of bureaucracy'.

Of greater worth perhaps would be training in bio-security. The effect of disinfectant is certainly not easy to access in a farm setting. It is interesting to hear about 'tighter measures' being taken to prevent spread to the pig herds on Humberside. There would appear to be grades of bio-security. Tight, tighter and tightest. Any information on effort required, costs incurred and results achieved could form the basis of a valuable presentation.

Richard can be contacted on 01363 866353 or E mail rga@agmed.freeseve.co.uk

Richard Gard
2nd August 2001