

Debating the triptych.

The final report of the Devon Inquiry has condensed the views of those involved into twelve carefully scripted pages. The triptych identified in the preface refers to 'handling the outbreak', 'handling any future outbreak' and 'looking to the future'.

Clearly stated is one of the aims of the findings of the Inquiry to 'support the county's bid for Government funding for the Devon Recovery Plan'. From the outset, therefore, the witness statements and views contained within the three hundred and eighty submissions were considered as guidance for the future rather than a culture of blame and recrimination.

Within the section on 'Vets and Vaccination', reference is made to the observations by Alan Richardson (Vet Times November 5th 2001) on the Cumbrian outbreak. This was published after the Inquiry and has been included because 'it underlines all that we have heard and provides factual support for some of the evidence offered to us'.

Taking the theme of the report, what issues are to be debated that will offer a better future? Inspection at the point of entry for all meat and meat product imports with additional staff to enforce a stricter regime, is the first recommendation. Secondly reduce the amount of spread of any future outbreak by an immediate ban on movements. This includes a routine twenty one day standstill on any susceptible stock that returns to a farm from market or slaughterhouse, the registration of all transactions and movements and a reduction in the rapid selling on of animals. A study is called for on the feasibility of re-establishing the right density of local abattoirs in order to reduce food miles.

It could be said that these are trade issues and outside the responsibilities of the profession but in the present climate it appears important to embrace the opportunities arising from the FMD crisis. The Inquiry report is entitled 'Crisis and Opportunity' and apparently there is a Chinese word that embraces both topics in one.

If vets are reluctant to engage in areas outside their direct expertise the Inquiry does not shrink from identifying what vets should be about. 'We find that the State Veterinary Service should be restored to a level which would enable it to respond more effectively to a future outbreak, and that the principle of 'retained vets' as Licensed Veterinary Inspectors should be enhanced so as to make them readily available to supplement the SVS force in any location in times of disease outbreak'. The report continues 'All retained vets should undergo regular training and refresher courses in the handling of animal disease epidemics'.

Vaccination, or the lack of it, has been the concern of many witnesses. Not surprisingly the report calls for more information and a strong policy direction supported by scientific understanding and research. Criticism of the contiguous culling could have filled the report but, simply, reference is made to the evidence being 'overwhelmingly critical' of the balance of effective need against unnecessary killing of healthy stock. The report states, 'We find that contiguous culling should be confined to dangerous contacts identified by vets on the ground, and then only after vaccination has ensured that slaughter rate and disposal rate can be reconciled'.

There is a great deal about this report that will relieve tensions that still exist in the Devon countryside. The extent of the disruption to everyone living in or venturing into the countryside has also been addressed and vets receive an honourable mention. 'Those managing access should be trusted to apply restrictions in line with veterinary advice in a pragmatic way. We find that more research is needed on the transport of the Foot and Mouth virus by boots, clothing, tyres, hooves and any other passive agent so that the degree of selection which might be applied to the closure of rights of way and the type of access may be determined to enable supportable local decisions to be made'.

DEFRA did not contribute to the Inquiry preferring to answer questions arising from it and these questions and answers are printed for perusal. Future action statements by the Ministry are restricted because DEFRA do not wish to prejudice the other Inquiries.

Copies of the final report of the Devon Foot and Mouth Inquiry 2001 (100 pages) are available from Devon Books (Tel: 01884 243242) at £4.95. All profits are donated to the Farm Crisis Network.

A number of black and white photographs illustrate the cull on one North Devon farm from notification through to cleansing. A vet is shown in caring mode cooing the calves and then in sombre mood carrying the last calf to slaughter. Some of the pictures are reproduced on the front cover and at first glance it appeared that there was a monk, wearing saffron, anointing the head of a cow. In fact it is a bald headed slaughterer wearing a coverall with a pouch belt firing the captive bolt. An unusual image with the puff of smoke from the discharge offering a placid and comforting scene. The camera never lies!

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