



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

BSE: A discrepancy between sectoral and collective interests

Lens van Rijn, M.A.J.

Citation

Lens van Rijn, M. A. J. (1997). BSE: A discrepancy between sectoral and collective interests. *Bestuurskundige Berichten*, 12(1), 10-12. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:3234021>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:3234021>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

BSE: A DISCREPANCY BETWEEN SECTORAL AND COLLECTIVE INTERESTS

M.A.J. Lens van Rijn

Onderstaand onderzoek tracht hard te maken dat er in de jaren 1986-1996 een discrepantie was tussen de belangen die door overheidsbeleid tot uitdrukking kwamen en de belangen van het brede publiek betreffende de risico's voor de volksgezondheid. De Britse regering had meer kunnen doen om de crisis te bezworen en de risico's te beperken.

The starting point is 1986, when the first case of BSE was identified by the Central Veterinary Laboratory following a post mortem. BSE stands for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and is often called 'Mad Cow Disease'. It is still not known why BSE started in Britain, although there have been hypotheses ascribing the cause to a number of combined factors specific to the UK. The rendering process may be significant in this respect. Six years prior to the first case of BSE, British government experts alerted their superiors to the possible dangers of the relatively low temperatures in the process of rendering offal.

It is not possible to treat BSE, or the human spongiform variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (CJD) for that matter, and it was until very recently impossible to detect the disease until its final stages, when the symptoms become apparent. The scary thing about BSE is its incubation period which is many years long. This means that cattle bread for human consumption, which are killed at a fairly young age, often must have the disease but are showing no symptoms (yet) and hence enter the human food supply unnoticed. This is called the sub-clinical stage. Even worse, CJD has an even longer period of induction, 5 to 30 years in some cases. Therefore, testing for a link between BSE and CJD proves to be a lengthy process. In 1989 tests were initiated, but terminated by officials, purportedly due to expense and its low priority. Only now have these tests been reinitiated.

The crucial question then, is whether in the face of the evidence that one has at one's disposal, all is being done to insure that the

risk to human health is within an acceptable limit. It is suggested here that certain groups, institutions, persons were consistently in an advantageous position, perpetuating a preferred state of affairs, at the expense of, in this case, British public health.

An important decision was taken in July 1988, when a ruminant (=cattle, sheep and deer) feed ban was introduced by the British government, forbidding the use of remains of these animals to be mashed up for consumption by fellow ruminants. The feed is usually called meat and bone meal and contains protein derived from ruminants. The government believed that this was probably the cause of BSE (see also Veterinary Record, October 1988) and by imposing the ban it was hoped the disease would be eradicated. The Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Maff) claimed that scrapie, a similar brain disease (spongiform encephalopathy), which has been present in sheep for centuries, has been transmitted to cattle. Scrapie does not pose a threat to humans, and nor does the analogous BSE, was the official conclusion. Vertical (dam to calf) transmission and horizontal (cow to cow) transfer was a fact in the case of scrapie, yet the official dogma was that BSE was a 'dead end host'; taking away the cause, infected feed, would make the disease disappear. Vertical transfer was "exceedingly unlikely".

The Southwood Committee, established May 1988 to examine implications of BSE in relation to animal health and possibly human health, predicted that the total number of BSE cases would be between 17 000 and 20 000.

The disease would die out and the risk to humans, it concluded in February 1989, was very remote.

To monitor the risks to humans, a sub committee named after Dr David Tyrrell, established February 1989, proposed in January 1990 that records should be kept on patients succumbing to CJD. Put another way, to test for a BSE-CJD link, this committee simply proposed monitoring the cases!

By 1988 there were 2185 confirmed cases of BSE (according to the parliamentary record Hansard) and these cases were excluded from the human food chain by being slaughtered and then incinerated or buried. Farmers were paid 50% of the market value in compensation (August 1988, Compensation Order SI 1988 no.1346) for these animals which could well be considered unfortunate as this may have been an inducement for farmers not to declare infected animals, thus letting BSE cows enter the food chain. Compensation rose to 100% by February 1990.

Note that prior to the 1988 ban BSE cows were entering the food chain freely and sub-clinically infected cows must to this day still be consumed.

In September 1990, a Specified Offals ban was introduced, prohibiting "as a precautionary measure" certain bovine parts from entering the food chain. Brain, spinal cord, thymus, tonsils, spleen and intestines were now excluded. The ban was Maff's response to the problem of bovines entering the food supply at a sub clinical stage. Calves under six months old were excluded from the ban on the grounds that these animals had not eaten the contaminated feed. Furthermore, even if these calves harboured the infectious agent, which was considered highly unlikely, the quantity would be very low, thus excluding any real risk.

The sheep offal theory was still the position of the government and the possibility of vertical transfer was considered remote. Beef was officially safe to eat, although it was known that meat from sheep that succumbed to scrapie contained the infective agent.

By 1991 it was becoming clear that BSE was taking on large proportions, 14 180 cases had been reported the previous year and the figures were rising steadily to 25 000 in 1991. Rather than focusing on the (unpleasant) possibilities of vertical and horizontal transmission, the government's explanation for the high number of BSE victims was still the 'bad feed' hypothesis. However, according to the government, the situation was more serious than the Southwood Committee had predicted

in its worse-case scenario, at least in part due to BSE in the contaminated feed, as well as scrapie. The credibility of the bad feed hypothesis as the exclusive cause of the crisis was now more than ever in question.

Scientists were consistently alerting the government of the dangers of its handling of BSE, but as facts remained inconclusive, these actors were portrayed as scaremongers. In February 1992, a letter by Professor Lacey was published in the Veterinary Record saying that considering the numbers of BSE cases some BSE cows could well have not been fed on contaminated feed, thus suggesting vertical and/or horizontal transfer.

The government line on the cause of BSE in 1993 continued to be the bad feed doctrine. Around 6000 cattle, born after the feed ban, had developed BSE, and this was the result of farmers using up their storage of contaminated feed (illegally!), so reported Maff. Evidence was steadily growing supporting vertical and horizontal transmission and a CJD link.

In 1993 two dairy farmers who had BSE infected herds died of CJD. CJD statistically only occurred in one in a million per year and therefore these incidences were picked up by the media.

BSE had occurred in small numbers outside of Britain, predominantly in cows exported from Britain. In Canada and Germany the entire herds in which infection had occurred, were slaughtered. Voices in the UK, who years earlier had called for the same measures in Britain, were not acted upon.

By April 1994 there was overwhelming evidence confirming vertical transfer, the authorities now implicitly acknowledged the likelihood although officially nothing was admitted. June saw a ban on intestines and thymus from calves under 6 months to enter the human food chain implicitly acknowledged the possibility of vertical transmission. Meat from cows showing no symptoms of BSE was still considered safe for consumption (!), although vertical transmission meant the infectious agent is in the blood and consequently in meat.

At this point there was still no government action to control cattle from BSE infected herds. There were 8 000 confirmed cases of BSE since the feed ban, 500 from mothers who succumbed to BSE. The evidence suggesting vertical transmission was seen by the government as further evidence that BSE behaves like scrapie, once again implying that because scrapie does not threaten humans, therefore beef is also safe.

On the issue of transference between spe-

cies: Can BSE jump from to other species and thus also to humans? Most animal infections do not. But BSE is considered to have come from the similar spongiform disease scrapie, found in sheep. Sheep have suffered from scrapie for the last couple of centuries and it has never seemed to affect humans. Yet if cows got BSE from sheep, should one not suspect the possibility of vertical and horizontal transmission to occur in cattle? After all, scrapie has been passed down for generations! And if BSE was obtained orally, as the feed hypothesis suggests, should we not be all the more worried about a potential threat to humans in the form of CJD?

In 1993 cases of CJD were ten times greater than 25 years earlier and twice as high as five years before.

The UK government prohibited in November 1995 abattoirs and butchers from stripping meat from cows' back-bones after fragments of potentially infectious spinal cord had been left attached to them.

160 000 cases of BSE were registered in 1996. Meat from cows over 30 months were prohibited for human consumption. Yet taking the incubation time into account, it is these mature cows that are most likely to show symptoms of BSE. How many 'sub clinical' cows are entering the food chain is still unknown and obvious research is omitted. The official position remains that these cases could not be sufficiently infectious to cause a hazard to humans.

In March 1996 23 000 cases were identified in younger cows since July 1988. Explaining this by referring to bad feed deserves criticism in its own right, but even more serious is the possible transmission of BSE from cow to calf, or that the tough disease persists in the soil (horizontal transfer).

This brings us to March 1996. Ten new cases of CJD were reported, announced in the House of Commons to be a new strain, and government admits possible link BSE-CJD. A year earlier, Stephen Churchhill died of what was then diagnosed as a new strain of CJD. Now samples of new strain CJD have been inoculated into mice under the auspices of SEAC (Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee) to test for a BSE-CJD link. These results will become available next year.

Dr Harash Narang in July 1996, speaking in the House of Commons, referred to the crisis as a "lethal threat of unknown proportion to the human population".

In conclusion, the aforementioned should make clear that not all was done to insure that the risks of BSE to human health were kept to a minimum. The omission to act adequately cannot be explained away by referring to inconclusive evidence. Vested interests of the agricultural community played an important role in the BSE affair.

*M.A.J. Lens van Rijn
student Bestuurskunde te Leiden*

De bovenstaande tekst is een onderdeel van een onderzoek over de 'gekke koeien ziekte', verricht voor het seminar Politiek Bestuurlijk Management.

Voor een volledige discussie verwijs ik naar de originele paper, geschreven door Ward Heiligers, Gusta Jessen, John Volleman en de auteur.

Verslag van het forum 'Na Van Traa'

C. Meijeraan

De commissie Fora & Symposia 1995-1996 organiseerde op 21 oktober jongstleden het forum 'Na Van Traa'.

Het doel van dit forum was tweezijdig. Het moest duidelijkheid verschaffen omtrent het nut van parlementaire enquêtes én ingaan op de lange termijn gevolgen van de commissie Van Traa.

Na een korte opening door prof.dr. U. Rosenthal leidde Deetman de dag in. Deetman zette het nut uiteen van parlementaire enquêtes en onderzoeken. Na eerst alle enquêtes kort door te lopen kwam hij tot de conclusie dat ze allen gezorgd hebben voor informatie, die als ze bij de kamer bekend was geweest had geleid tot sterk ingrijpen van deze kamer. De fouten (zoals het lekken van conclusies voordat het onderzoek is afgelopen), die zo nu en dan gemaakt worden door mensen binnen een enquête-commissie waren vervelend maar mochten niet leiden tot de slotsom dat enquêtes dan maar afgeschafte moeten worden. Volgens Deetman zijn enquêtes een stok achter de deur: er bestaat altijd het risico van onderzoek. Bovendien worden ingewikkelde problemen zichtbaar gemaakt en zorgen enquêtes ervoor dat politici niet alleen de waan van de dag volgen.

De volgende spreker was de heer De Graaf. Hij zag een enquête als een nuttig instrument maar vond dat er niet zoveel heisa omheen moest zijn. Het is nodig om de enquêtes te depolitiseren, om er zodoende voor te zorgen dat de gevolgen minder opportunistisch waren. Een voorbeeld van dat opportunisme was het continue gepraat over het laten rollen van koppen. Volgens De Graaf zou dat structureel niks op leveren, omdat iedereen in de toenmalige organisatie hetzelfde gehandeld zou hebben. Het is gek om mensen weg te sturen wanneer zij geen persoonlijke schuld hebben gehad.

Verder had hij het idee dat iedereen het rapport van de commissie Van Traa erg goed vond en overtuigd was van het nut om er iets mee te doen, behalve als het betrekking had op het eigen terrein. "Het is een mooie beker,

maar laat hem maar aan mij voorbij gaan".

Als laatste wees hij erop dat officieel enquêtes zwaarder zijn dan onderzoeken maar dat dat in de praktijk ook weleens anders uitpakt heeft. Er zijn meer mensen weggestuurd vanwege onderzoeken dan vanwege enquêtes.

Het grote voordeel van een enquête - het onder ede verhoren - heeft minder nut dan wordt verwacht. "Als je iets wilt verbergen dan kan je altijd liegen. Als je niet wilt liegen dan kan je uit voorgaande enquêtes leren dat het heel handig is om een slecht geheugen te hebben". Ook is het mogelijk dat er een verschil in perceptie is. Als voorbeeld noemde hij de mogelijkheid dat zowel Sorgdrager (in haar functie als Procureur-Generaal) als de heer Blok (hoofdofficier van Justitie) naar hun mening de waarheid vertelden toen de een onder ede zei dat hij de doorlating van cocaïne op een duidelijke wijze gemeld had aan Sorgdrager en de ander vertelde dat de heer Blok het punt niet expliciet aan de orde had gesteld. Verschil in perceptie over de belangrijkheid van het moment van vertellen kan tot deze situatie geleid hebben.

De volgende spreker: de heer Kranenburg, was gevraagd om alternatieven aan te dragen voor parlementaire enquêtes. Aangezien hij van mening was dat het enige alternatief geen enquête is, was hij daarover snel uitgesproken.

In plaats van een verhaal over alternatieven ging hij in op de gevolgen. Volgens hem zijn alle gevolgen en ontwikkelingen, die aan parlementaire enquêtes worden toegedicht, al op gang gezet voordat er ook maar gesproken werd over het instellen van een enquête-commissie.

Daarnaast wees hij erop dat het deelnemen aan een enquête-commissie een goede