Animal Diseases and Modern Farming Practices

When animals are exploited and stressed through modern farming systems, many will get sick and infirm. The consumer also often has to pay a price from eating unhealthy animals.

Concern, often verging on panic, about the safety of food has been the stuff of headlines for over a decade. Whether the issue is BSE, salmonella, campylobacter, E. coli 0157, scrapie, swine fever, bovine TB, foot and mouth disease or the more recent bird flu, the common factor to all these scares is that they relate to the flesh and secretions of animals.

The farming industry – backed by politicians – often seeks to scapegoat an innocent animal species for these outbreaks. For instance, badgers are blamed for bovine TB, wild boar for the swine fever outbreak amongst shed-reared pigs, and wild birds for giving factory reared chickens Newcastle's disease. But the real lesson is clear for anyone who wishes to learn it: the more we stress and exploit animals under modern systems of intensive rearing, the weaker the animals will become and the more they will fall prey to disease. When people then eat any part of the diseased and enfeebled bodies of these animals, they run an increasingly high risk of themselves becoming ill. Record levels of food poisoning demonstrate this point. As does the BSE catastrophe, which translates into vCJD when people are afflicted.

BSE And Other Cattle Diseases

The specific causative agent of BSE is still debated. (Infected sheep meat? The use of toxic pesticides to attack endemic levels of cattle infestation? The injection of a contaminated hormone during high tech breeding programmes?) All the main theories, however, relate to unnatural practises aimed at extracting maximum profit from animals who were already at physiological breaking point because of the volume of milk and calf 'output' demanded of them.

A variant form of the degenerative disease, CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease) has been linked to the consumption of cattle infected with BSE. CJD typically affects those over the age of 55 but vCJD is found in much younger people. Early symptoms include memory loss, mood changes and loss of interest in life. This is followed by clumsiness, confusion, unsteadiness and slow or slurred speech. As the weeks pass, movement becomes jerky and the limbs become shaky or stiff. Other problems, such as incontinence develop and the person is increasingly unable to speak or move, until they lose awareness of their surroundings. Death usually occurs within six months to a year. There have been more than 100 cases of variant CJD in Britain since the first death in 1995.

E.coli 0157 is another disease bug that thrives in stressed cattle. It is thought to spread especially easily amongst animals who are forced to endure the extra long journeys to slaughterhouses, in crowded trucks, which are now increasingly common. In March 1998, an E.coli 0157 outbreak left 21 people dead in Lanarkshire; all had eaten meat products from infected animals. Bovine TB in another serious problem amongst modern intensively reared cattle – yet thousands of badgers are being pointlessly killed under government orders to placate a farming industry that refuses to clean up its act.

Sheep, BSE And Other Diseases

There are now fears that BSE has spread to sheep, from whom many believe it originated in the form of the disease scrapie. While BSE in cattle is believed – probably incorrectly – to be confined to the brain and central nervous system, lab experiments have produced infection in sheep's lymph nodes and spleen, the latter organ being connected to the animal's entire blood supply. In other words, any infection would migrate throughout the whole body.

Surely, sheep aren't victims of intensification in the same way as are pigs, chickens and cattle? In fact, the popular image of sheep in their contented element couldn't be more false. Sheep have never relished standing in the driving rain and snow – or in summer drought conditions – without shelter. And they have always paid the price for having to do so by way of early mortality, miscarriage and chronic disease. With fewer shepherds to attend to the animals' basic needs, along with new feeding and breeding regimes aimed at maximising lamb numbers and 'carcase quality', the rate of disease and early mortality are correspondingly high. Trade figures show that 15% of 17 million lambs die every year within a few days of birth – the principle causes being exposure, malnutrition and disease.

Once again, the burden on these animals translates into potential health problems for the human

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consumers of their flesh. One sheep disease that has so far attracted little commentary is maedi visna. The condition can fairly be described as a form of sheep AIDS, both in terms of its genetic composition and the disease it causes – leading to wasting, neurological damage, secondary infections, pneumonia and so on.

Pig Diseases

Farmed pigs, most of whom are raised in stone and metal pens inside crowded sheds, are also prone to numerous ailments, whose impact on human consumers is little understood. These include respiratory diseases (e.g. enzootic pneumonia and rhinitis); diarrhoea, or scours (typically caused by E.coli or swine dysentery); and reproductive viruses such as parvo-virus, enterovirus and SMEDI. Then there is meningitis, swine fever and mange. A current and large problem in the pig industry is the spread of PMWS (Post-weaning Multisystemic Wasting Syndrome or Pig Wasting Disease) that causes pigs to lose excessive body weight. It is an incurable disease that can cause up to 20% of weaned piglets to die. Economically it could be as devastating as foot and mouth. The conditions found in factory farms simply provide a breeding ground for all manner of diseases. The pigs are stressed, unhealthy and unable to combat these disease organisms.

The trade tries to keep these diseases at bay through the application of a wide range of invariably toxic pharmaceutical products. But it's a losing battle within a regime whose prime objective is to produce more piglets per sow and get the fattened animals off to slaughter as rapidly as possible. Some pigs are even showing signs of anorexia. The affected animals are usually young females, who fail to eat, become hyperactive and infertile.

Foot And Mouth Disease

In 2001, more than 6 million farmed animals were destroyed and either incinerated or buried in pits to stop the spread of foot and mouth disease, a highly infectious illness that affects sheep, pigs, cattle and goats. The disease was said to have originated on a filthy pig farm. It very quickly spread as animals were transported to markets and slaughterhouses round the country. Some humans have been known to contract the disease from infected animals, which has flu-like effects and may cause blisters on the hands, feet and mouth. At the time of the epidemic, livestock markets were suspended for fear of spreading the disease further. These markets have since been re-opened. However, a detailed Animal Aid investigation (*A Dirty Business*) has demonstrated that basic biosecurity rules are not being adhered to, which means that the risk of another disease epidemic is current and substantial.

Poultry Diseases

The same formula as applies to the sheep and cattle industries holds true for the chicken industry. The trade journal, *Poultry World*, has listed some 100 ailments that 'commonly' afflict commercial poultry – notably cage-reared laying hens, turkeys and broiler chickens, who are reared scores of thousand to each stinking, windowless shed. Salmonella, unsurprisingly, is endemic and so is campylobacter, a bacterial infection that causes serious complications in one in ten human sufferers. Symptoms include septicaemia and even paralysis. An estimated 6000 people fell ill and 15 people died in 2004 when they contracted Salmonella from imported Spanish eggs (*The Guardian*, 15.10.2004).

Bird Flu

An explosion in intensive farming practices in South East Asia combined with the close proximity of animals living next to humans has resulted in the farming industry's most recent disease outbreak, Avian flu (bird flu), resulting in the death of over 35 million birds so far. This highly contagious viral disease is caused – and easily spread – by the cramped and unhygienic conditions the birds are kept in. Wild migratory birds can also act as carriers in helping to spread the disease between captive flocks. Bird flu has more than one strain and has managed to jump the species barrier to infect humans. Symptoms are similar to other strains of flu, including fever, fatigue, cough and sore throat. The World Health Organisation has warned that avian flu has the potential to be more serious than the lethal Sars virus, which emerged in 2003, if it mutates into a form that can pass from human to human.

Antiobotic Resistant Bacteria

The transfer of antibiotic resistance from animals to humans is now an established fact. According to the World Health Organisation, more than half of all the antibiotics produced worldwide are currently used in farmed animals. They are routinely administered and often over-used in factory farming to compensate for overcrowded and unhealthy conditions that are likely to lead to the spread of infections. Due to the wide use of antibiotics in farmed animals, bacteria are widely exposed to them and eventually mutate, becoming resistant to the antibiotics, and therefore ineffective. The resistant bacteria can be transferred from farmed animals to humans through the following routes: direct contact with the animals carrying resistant bacteria; eating meat contaminated with resistant bacteria; eating eggs or milk contaminated by resistant bacteria that have not been properly pasteurised or cooked; eating contaminated products grown in manure with resistant bacteria, or eating food preservatives contaminated with resistant bacteria. When the same antibiotics are used to treat the resistant bacteria in humans, they are just as ineffective in the human patients as in the farmed animals. Resistant strains of four bacteria that cause disease in humans are known to have been transferred from animals. They are salmonella, campylobacter, enterococci and E.coli. In the past, new antibiotics could be introduced to take the place of those that were losing their effectiveness. But now the alternatives are running out.

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