

Dear Senator,

One of the main topics in the media in the past week has been the government's decision to allow the importation of overseas beef into Australia starting today from countries known to have Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (mad cow disease) and its human equivalent (spread from BSE) variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD). This is a serious threat to the health of all Australians. One of my aunts died with CJD in 2000, it is a terrible way to die and is untreatable. I have recently submitted a thesis on the subject and all of the following comments have been thoroughly researched.

BSE has not gone away.

Most countries of the world are infected. Australia and New Zealand are 2 of less than half a dozen countries officially free from BSE and scrapie (mad sheep disease).

Millions of cattle in the UK were destroyed in an effort to try and stop BSE, mainly by shooting and burning.

One infected cow can be used to make 5 tonnes of food material which can infect hundreds of thousands of people. The number of people dying with CJD is steadily rising both within and outside of the UK.

BSE is believed to have spread into the UK sheep flock.

Cows have been slaughtered in the UK/Europe for the food chain under the age of 30 months.

The disease usually presents after cattle attain 36 months of age because the incubation period lasts for years.

Cattle are being consumed overseas in the incubation period.

Cows and humans are infectious in the incubation period.

The incubation period in humans is years to decades.

Blood, body fluids including saliva are contagious as is muscle (meat), not just the spinal column.

Tests are only accurate in the final stages of the disease or at post mortem and can easily have false negatives in humans and animals. Tests are rarely performed.

At least 20 species other than cattle have become infected including fish (bream) fed experimentally with BSE material. This has implications for farmed fish, one of the intended main future protein sources for the world.

The infectious proteins termed prions are resistant to all of the usual methods used to kill infections and most sterilizers will not kill them.

The minimal infectious dose is unknown but 1 mg of BSE material from the brain of an infected animal can infect a calf with BSE. Butchers saws traverse neuronal (brain, spinal cord and nerves) material.

Prions adhere well to surgical and dental instruments.

CJD prions have been spread through surgery in Australia, which although rare has occurred.

Infected meat can spread the disease onto butchers and restaurant saws, boning knives, meat cleavers and to cutlery and utensils used by clubs and restaurants.

The government changed the regulations in Australia in 2002 to allow the importation of live embryos and semen for many species including cattle and sheep from countries known to be infected with BSE and scrapie.

Yesterday represents another serious widening of the breach in our quarantine border security.

A thought for the future: animal genes have been placed into plants, raising the possibility of even wider ramifications in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Alan Fahey