

## COWED BY MAD COW

The recent discovery of a Washington State cow afflicted with BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) aka Mad Cow Disease, has caused a nationwide recoil from that American staple, beef. The subsequent discovery that the cow in question originated in Canada, occasioned a collective sigh of relief. However, for some, pinning a nationality on the animal and playing the game of, "It was your cow!" "No, it was your cow." will not prove reassuring, nor put to rest the emergent questions about food safety, humane treatment of animals, adequate testing, and cannibalism.

Knowing that cows, chickens, sheep, and pigs, raised under mass agribusiness, are forced to consume their own kind, as well as subsist on, ahem, chicken s--t, in order to speed their way onto our plates, may turn some people towards at least a temporary abstention, if not outright vegetarianism. Others will forge on grateful that, at least for now, there has been no documented case in the U.S. of variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (vCJD), the human form of Mad Cow Disease, which can be transmitted to those eating prion-contaminated meat. As of December 2003, there have been a total of 153 human cases reported worldwide, according to the Center for Disease Control. After a highly unpleasant transit through dementia, victims of vCJD invariably die.

Each year, there are at least three hundred cases in the U.S. of so-called "classic" Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease, which features similar symptoms. It's hard to confirm exactly how many cases because a determination can only be made via an autopsy, not usually done on seniors, whom classic CJD typically strikes. Since its symptoms are indistinguishable from Alzheimer's, some doctors theorize that a given percentage of Alzheimer's cases could be under-reported CJD. However, they don't know for sure because the university programs set up to conduct such tests are under-funded.

The Center for Disease Control has thankfully established a firewall between variant CJD, (the Bad Mad Cow form) and classic CJD, or sporadic CJD, which strikes seniors as well as inexplicably also downing young adults. The latter two forms are not linked to BSE infection, they assert. So what causes these two more prevalent forms? Consulting the CJD Foundation web-site reveals that the section for causative agents is marked "under construction."

That's because scientists don't know the cause, though some studies show that regular beef consumption may increase risk. However, they do know one thing: BSE is definitely not the cause. Has science really tested and thereby eliminated any possible connection between BSE and the other hundreds, and possibly thousands of CJD cases that appear annually? No, but it has done the next best thing. It has eliminated the connection through mind-numbing nomenclature.

The complexity of all the variations on an unpronounceable name, signifying a dreadful disease that may (or may not) be caused by Mad Cows, will readily defeat the average person, inclining only the most stalwart from shrugging and reaching for a big Mac. After all, if Mad Cow were here, we would know about it, right? Side of fries with it, please.

Wrong, claim the families of those who've watched a loved one lose their minds and die without ever receiving a clear diagnosis, for this disease with no cure, and no known etiology.

One victim was 35 year old Peter Putnam, who died last October. He gave a professional presentation to a large audience, only days before he was found, disoriented, wandering around the airport, unable to either board his flight, or identify his vehicle. "Peter was very healthy, didn't smoke, didn't drink, and ran ten miles every other day," reports his mother, a native of Spokane, Washington, where she knows several other cases of the disease. On her way to work, she'd often find herself driving behind cattle trucks carrying their loads down from Canada. "You'd have to roll up your windows because of the stench," she recalls. Whether the cows were Canadian nationals, or not, they were here in the U.S., joining our food system, and their by-products could well be circulating through it this very day.

Peter, a marketing executive, was a strapping 6'3" and "loved his beef," says his Mom. As Peter's condition rapidly degenerated, a brain biopsy revealed that Peter had variant CJD. This could make Peter, the first case of human Mad Cow disease in the U.S. Or, then again, maybe not. Later results from a preliminary autopsy report seem to indicate that Putnam may be one of the unlucky few who for no known reason instead contracted "sporadic" CJD. The rising incidence of "sporadic" CJD cases is unfortunate, but there is no reason to link those cases with Mad Cow. Or is there?

What functionally is the key distinction between two different variations of the same disease, for which there is no treatment? Recent studies of mice injected with BSE, revealed that some mice developed vCJD and some "sporadic" CJD, indicating that the "sporadic" cases could also be attributed to BSE exposure. In fact, the variation between the two forms of CJD could be due to other factors, such as genes, or environmental factors. This finding, though preliminary, is significant because it indicates that the hundreds of "sporadic" cases striking young adults are not tucked safely behind a firewall, where they bear no relation to our meat industry, governmental regulatory, or health safety practices. If other studies support these findings, all the confusion about variations on unpronounceable names may turn out to be less than relevant. "It's like the early days of AIDS," said Putnam's brother, "While people are hoping it isn't true, people are dying, and it's time something was done about it."