



Editorial

Is only the cow mad?

The link between food and diseases is not new; nevertheless, the connection between a fatal human neurodegenerative disease (a variant CJD) and beef continues to generate much public outrage. The beef industry in some countries is in terrible gloom and regions that have been spared the outfall are also susceptible to this crisis.

The public expects a safe food supply and the governments are expected to guarantee food safety through legislation, regulation, and oversight. Unfortunately, governments are easily swayed from their essential role of protecting the public, because of the vested interests of those in government and the other powerful interest groups. When fewer and less powerful interests are at stake, governments can usually act quickly. For example, decisions to ban potentially contaminated food imports are generally made faster than banning the sale of national produce. As a consequence of many of these interests, our food sources are not as safe as they could be.

Issues of food safety are widespread and impact every aspect of the agroindustrial complex, including animal husbandry and agricultural practices, food processing and distribution, and the catering industry. Sale of beef potentially contaminated with BSE (mad cow disease) to public is only one example of the recurring problems with food safety. Others include salmonella in eggs, use of antibiotics in animal feed, the practice of feeding rendered carcasses to noncarnivores, use of questionable preservatives, contamination of product with chemicals leached from packaging, treatments such as irradiation, and contamination with pesticide residues. And there is still the unresolved issue of production and consumer safety of genetically modified foods. There is death in the pot, it seems.

Because food is everyone's business, public pressure remains intense for developing fail-safe practices for ensuring the safety of our food. What is to be done? It is of course naïve to expect decision-making that is entirely free of political influence, but the problems faced can be solved only by a purely scientific approach that minimizes interference from food producing and processing lobbies.

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