

Viewpoints

on the foot and mouth epidemic

In difficult times, people tend to take sides. Their ideas reflect their personal situation. You are going to look at a real emergency – the epidemic of foot and mouth disease in 2001. You will think about the different viewpoints of several groups of people.

The foot and mouth epidemic of 2001

Foot and mouth disease affects cattle, sheep and other animals. It can be disastrous for farmers, because they cannot sell their animals. It is a very infectious disease.

During 2001 an epidemic of foot and mouth disease spread through large areas of England, Scotland and Wales. There was a fierce national debate about how best to control and halt the disease. The government decided on two main control measures to stop it spreading:

- They banned the movement of animals.
- They slaughtered whole herds when new cases were identified.

(This slaughtering was also referred to as ‘culling’.) Some people argued strongly that healthy animals should be vaccinated so that they could not become infected, but this was not done. By the end of 2001, after 9 months, the disease was finally eradicated. Almost 10,000 farms had been affected, and over 4 million animals had been culled.

Who was affected?

You will be given sketches describing the viewpoints of the main groups of people affected by the foot and mouth epidemic. Read these sketches, and think about the following questions:

- Who had animals that were affected by the disease?
- Who else had to deal with infected animals?
- Who was affected financially by the foot and mouth epidemic?
- Who was compensated? Who paid for the compensation?
- In a future epidemic, should vaccination be used as an alternative to culling?
- What other worries were triggered by the epidemic?

Be prepared to present your ideas to the class

Farmers

■ Won't you be compensated if your cattle or sheep are culled?

Even though the government has promised to compensate us for the animals slaughtered, living with this situation has been indescribably awful for our families.

■ What happens if there is an outbreak of the disease near you?

If the local area becomes affected, not only is movement of animals restricted, but our movements are too. We worry constantly that there will be an outbreak of the disease nearby and our herd will become infected. Many farms have seen all their livestock slaughtered ... and then what does 'farming' mean?

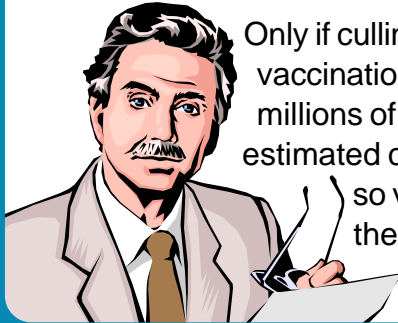


Farmers' Union

■ Why do you favour culling of animals, even if they may not be infected?

We want to see this disease eradicated as quickly as possible. However, it is very difficult to predict the progress of an epidemic and how quickly control measures will take effect. Culling (slaughtering all animals within 3 km of an outbreak) is the sensible option.

■ Would vaccination be better than culling?



Only if culling of animals proves ineffective should we introduce vaccination. It's a complicated and expensive business. Hundreds of millions of animals would need to be vaccinated twice a year, at an estimated cost of £570 million a year. Vaccines are never 100% effective, so vaccinated herds would have to be slaughtered anyway once the epidemic was brought under control, in case any of the animals had caught the disease despite being vaccinated.

Rural Tourism and Cottage Businesses

■ How has the foot and mouth epidemic affected tourism?

It has caused terrible damage. I blame the government's handling of it, rather than the disease itself. People who would otherwise have planned a holiday to enjoy the beauty of the English countryside were totally put off by TV images of the slaughter and disposal of millions of animals. And in most of the country, the footpaths were closed, so walkers have stayed away.

■ Have you been compensated by the government, like the farmers?

What the government didn't take into account is that our businesses are worth billions of pounds, and represent far more of the rural economy than farming, which accounts for only 4% of the rural workforce. The government paid out £5 billion to farmers, to compensate them for slaughtered animals, but we have received only £300 million in compensation for our loss of earnings. Businesses have collapsed and thousands of people have lost their jobs.



UK Food Industry

■ Why did you oppose vaccinating cattle and sheep against foot and mouth disease?

After the first month, when slaughtering animals failed to bring the epidemic under control quickly, the government considered combining culling with a vaccination programme for animals in a ring outside the cull areas. But we stopped them. Had they gone ahead with vaccination, it would have destroyed this country's meat export business, which was worth £600 million each year before the BSE trouble.



■ Why would meat exports be affected?

Other countries would have been scared of importing the disease because apparently healthy animals could be carrying live virus – vaccination isn't 100% effective. It could also have hit sales here in the UK, because consumers would have worried that they might become infected by drinking milk or by eating meat. In the end, there were no human victims of the disease.

Veterinary Officers



■ What is your role in fighting the foot and mouth epidemic?

We are required to inspect suspected animals wherever they are reported, and we have to decide whether to slaughter herds. We are the ones who call in the Army to destroy animals. We have to explain our medical judgement about animals to farmers and their families, who are distressed about their situation. And we have to explain why such severe precautions must be taken in order to bring the disease under control.

■ Were you pleased to have this extra work?

There are just not enough of us, despite extra vets being brought in from abroad. We have been totally exhausted by this epidemic.

Consumers

■ Can consumers be sure that the meat they buy is safe to eat?

Eating a balanced diet is essential to human health. Many consumers are therefore concerned that the food in our supermarkets should be cheap and varied, but also of high quality. The shopping public needs to be confident that the food they buy in shops is safe to eat.

■ Have you any worries for the future?

We worry that intensive farming practices will produce new and unforeseen problems. Before foot and mouth we had mad cow disease and other food scares. Now we learn that meat is imported into the UK from over 50 countries. How much can we trust the food we buy from shops and supermarkets?

