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# Canada's Problem - and America's

By MICHAEL K. HANSEN

The discovery of a case of mad cow disease in Canada underlines the need for American officials to exercise much greater vigilance to prevent the emergence of this fatal brain-wasting disease in the United States. Live cattle, beef products and animal feed move relatively freely between the United States and Canada; last year the United States imported one billion pounds of beef from Canada. Unfortunately, the federal government's defenses are full of gaps.

Mad cow disease is one of several similar fatal brain diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies. They are so named because of their main effect: the infected brain eventually becomes riddled with spongelike holes. The disease is believed to be caused by a mutant protein that, when eaten, travels through the body to the brain. The effect on the victim is always the same: mental deterioration and death.

There have been 100 confirmed deaths in Britain from the human form of mad cow disease, which is thought to be caused by eating tainted beef, and the number is rising. So far the United States has been lucky. But to prevent an outbreak, a number of steps need to be taken immediately.

First, we need to screen more cattle for the disease. Last year, the United States Department of Agriculture tested only 19,990 cows believed to be at risk for mad cow disease, out of a population of about 96 million. This sample is far too small to detect a problem that might be small but growing. The department should mandate the use of rapid tests, currently used in Europe, which have allowed testing of all cattle above a certain age at slaughter. Last year European regulators tested more than 10 million cattle for mad cow disease, out of a total population of some 40 million.

The Food and Drug Administration should also ban the feeding of all animal remains to food animals. At factory farms and feed lots, cattle, hogs and chickens eat a relatively high-protein diet, and much of this protein comes from the rendered remains of other cattle, hogs or chickens.

The European Union, for example, does not allow animal remains to be fed to any food animal. (In Britain, cows are believed to have been infected by eating sheep with scrapie, which is a form of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy.) But under the F.D.A.'s current rules, cattle remains can still be fed to other animals, such as pigs and chickens, whose remains can then be fed back to cows. Even the remains of an animal known to carry a form of mad cow disease could go into rendered feed, under F.D.A. rules.

More than just meat is at risk. Materials from some of the most potentially infectious parts of a cow, including brains, eyes and spleen, sometimes end up in dietary supplements. This fact, along with recent deaths associated with use of the dietary supplement ephedra, underlines the need for Congress to require dietary supplements to prove their safety before being marketed.

Despite all these efforts, an outbreak could still occur. If it does, we might not know for some time if Americans were becoming infected with a mad-cow-like disease at an increased rate - because it is not one of the diseases doctors and hospitals must report to the Centers for Disease Control. It should be made a mandatory reportable disease.

While the government considers what it can do, what should consumers do? The size of the risk is unknown, so it's hard to say. However, some foods are clearly more risky than others.

Since the most infectious material is to be found in the brains of cows, consumers could simply avoid them. Some processed beef products, like many sausages and hot dogs, are produced using machines that scour a cow carcass for all available meat. Since they may contain central nervous system tissue, some people may want to avoid them as well. A steak, or hamburger that the butcher grinds in front of you, carries the least risk. Consumers may also want to consider organic or grass-fed beef, since these cows are not fed any animal proteins.

The bottom line is that the government should act now to protect the food supply. Delay will only allow any potential problem to get worse.

***Michael K. Hansen is a senior research associate at Consumers Union***