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Duplicity makes me afraid to eat beef

Letter to the Editor

By Ian Shaw, Ottawa

PHOTO & CAPTION: *"Ian Shaw said he stopped eating beef because he's afraid the government is willing to leave consumers at unnecessary risk to protect Canada's cattle industry."*

With the BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) problem continuing to escalate in Canada, I have stopped eating beef. I didn't make this decision because I doubt the science that says the risk is small, but because I have a nagging voice inside my head that tells me the government is willing to make a trade-off between the misery of the few versus the misery of the many.

Ordinarily, this is not a bad thing. Indeed, it harkens back to the utilitarian theories of 18th-century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Yet in this case, there is a darkness surrounding the government decision because I believe it involves duplicity.

If the cost to test each beast that is slaughtered is \$30 per animal, that would add six cents per pound to market cuts of beef. There is no argument available that would support saving six cents per pound when the downside is human suffering and a decimated beef industry.

However, I believe there is a great fear that mandatory testing will turn up hundreds or thousands of infected livestock. Although these animals may, according to the scientific data, present only a minimal risk to Canadians, the very notion that the disease is widespread among the Canadian herds would drive consumers to seek alternatives to beef. That would cause a major slump in the Canadian economy as cattle farmers and abattoirs close their doors.

What worries me most is not the risk of contracting Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease from eating infected beef, but rather the ethics of the group of people who would put the financial interests of the beef industry above the honest and open alternative of testing all our slaughtered animals and making the true state of the health of our livestock clear to Canadians in general.

Hiding the truth never works in the long term, and being seen to be trying to hide the truth only makes me more suspicious.