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## **Mad cows a symptom of sick food**

**By David Suzuki**

The discovery of yet another Canadian cow infected with BSE, or mad cow disease, has again raised alarm bells about the safety of our beef and has producers worried about extended import bans to the United States. But really, we should be asking ourselves what caused the problem in the first place and how we can make our meat production safe and sustainable.

It's an issue that has become more urgent since a new report has found that even parts of cattle that had previously been considered low risk may still harbour the rogue proteins called "prions" that are suspected of causing vCJD, the human variant of mad cow disease.

According to a report to be published in the journal *Science*, researchers found that when they induced an "inflammatory response" (the body's natural immune response to common illness and injury) in mice infected with the equivalent of BSE, there was an explosion of prions in the rodents' organs like the kidney and liver - organs that had been thought to be relatively immune to the proteins. If the same response occurs in BSE-infected cattle, then no part of the animal may be safe.

And mad cow is just one of many problems we've created through the industrial meat production practices that have become common over the past few decades. Not long ago, most people purchased their meat from a butcher, who knew where his meat came from and what the animals were fed. When larger supermarkets replaced small butcher shops, most of these stores still had an in-house butcher, and animal carcasses were proudly displayed behind glass - to be custom cut according to the customer's needs. Today, we have stepped back even more. Now, most of our meat comes in standardized, sanitized, shrink-wrapped packages in supermarket coolers, or is found already processed in luncheon meats, canned goods and frozen entrees. We've distanced ourselves so much from the source of our food that we no longer consider its biological origins. And when you get that far away from something, you lose perspective.

As a result, most of us have no idea where their meat comes from or what goes into raising the butchered animals. In fact, high-volume factory farming practices are now common, where vast numbers of chickens, pigs and cattle are raised in close quarters on high-protein diets and fed large quantities of antibiotics and growth hormones to prevent them from getting sick and make them grow faster. Family farms have a hard time competing with these massive-scale operations.

And when the bottom line is always to cut costs and improve profit margins, then animal welfare, food safety and environmental considerations go out the window. If producers can save money by feeding meat byproducts to cattle and essentially turning animals that are naturally herbivores into carnivores, then that's what happens. And if society ends up with avian flu outbreaks, BSE, antibiotic-resistant bacteria and water pollution from vast quantities of manure, then too bad for us. Industrial meat suppliers don't have to pay for these problems - they are borne by all of society.

We do have options. First, we can eat less meat. The average Canadian eats 276 grams (almost 2/3 of a pound) of meat every day. That's three times the amount recommended by the World Cancer Research Fund. Second, as consumers, we can support better farming practices by finding out where our meat comes from, asking for organic or natural, grass-fed beef and voicing concerns about factory farming and other unsustainable meat production practices to our political leaders.

Ultimately for our food system to be safe and sustainable, we have to prevent problems like BSE from happening in the first place. Cleaning up the mess afterwards is inefficient, expensive and can even prove deadly.