

MAD COWS AND MODERNITY: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS
ON THE CRISIS OF CREUTZFELDT-JAKOB DISEASE
May 1995

Mad Cows and Modernity, the publication arising from the Forum held in May 1995, was launched by Professor Paul Bourke, founding President of the National Academies Forum, on 22 October 1998.

Professor Bourke outlined the book's contents, and offered some reflections on cross-disciplinarity. The following is an extract from his comments on the day.

Mad Cows and Modernity is divided into three sections:

- 'Communication', containing studies by Cathy Banwell and Charles Guest of media reactions to the announced connection between BSE and Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease [CJD], and Michael Fitzpatrick's tight discussion of the more extreme British press reaction.
- 'Evaluating Risk' containing Colin Masters' summary of the state of scientific knowledge with its ominous conclusion about new and compelling evidence linking BSE with the new strain of CJD; and Simon Crant's application of the vocabulary and procedures of rational choice theory to the problem of what governments should do confronted with evidence of possible high risk to populations.
- 'Humanities' which offers Harriet Ritvo's historical account of the identification of the British with eating livestock and cattle; Hank Nelson's wonderful narrative of the awful history of the Fore people and the identification of the cause of the transmission among them of Kuru disease, one of this group of diseases; and Robin Wallace-Crabbe's ethnographic understanding of the point of view of the cow.

I won't summarise these in detail but urge you to read them, enjoy them and profit from them in a whole host of ways. I want to pause briefly on two related points arising particularly in a couple of them.

Cross-disciplinarity: Iain McCalman's characteristically generous and stylish Introduction tells the story of how the enterprise began – NAF looking about for a way to demonstrate its cross-disciplinary purposes. He refers to the dinner early in 1996 at which Gus Nossal and I tossed around subjects for an initial seminar but history obliges me to add that neither of us actually came up with 'Mad Cows' – it was thrown into the conversation by one of our number, I think – rather implausibly – an engineer. Anyway, it led to that wonderful meeting so ably sketched by Iain. Now that we have its

product plus three additional contributions, it is possible to think a bit about cross-disciplinarity.

These essays by and large stay within their disciplinary fields and exhibit their styles and approaches very effectively. There is little actual barrier crossing here – science isn't infected by history or cultural studies with perhaps the notable exception of Michael Fitzpatrick's piece.

No, what we get is a rare chance to see in parallel array half a dozen disciplines considering a common problem; we get a chance to think about what the independent and dependent variables assumed by these various authors, to see that Hank Nelson's subtle analysis is contained within story, that Colin Masters' history is a history of contamination episodes and of scientific advance; that Simon Grant's assumption of rational actor behaviour has unsuspected possibilities for thinking about policy. So there's a chance for yet another essay on what the prospects for actually transcending disciplines may be.

Much of the book is about the problem of how expertise influences public policy. How should scientific discovery with massive public health implications get fed into political and public understanding? The recent Sydney water scare is another good example. And how can communication across the different bodies of expertise – in this case, medical, economic, agricultural, epidemiological, sociological and so on – be focused into a coherent single line of sensible advice to government. Simon Grant's proposal is for the flows of information to be more constant, less episodic; Cathy Banwell, Charles Guest and Michael Fitzpatrick all point to the difference between the trajectory and purpose of announcing scientific results (which is meant to initiate discussion) and media concerns which are to present closure before moving on. And Hank Nelson's account of the arrogance and tribal character of the practice of some scientists is itself absorbing.

The point that strikes me here is that the principal responsibility lies with scientists themselves – that the esteem and other prizes of their profession and the corrupting competitiveness between groups, people and institutions which I happen to think is threatening important values in our universities should be contested.