

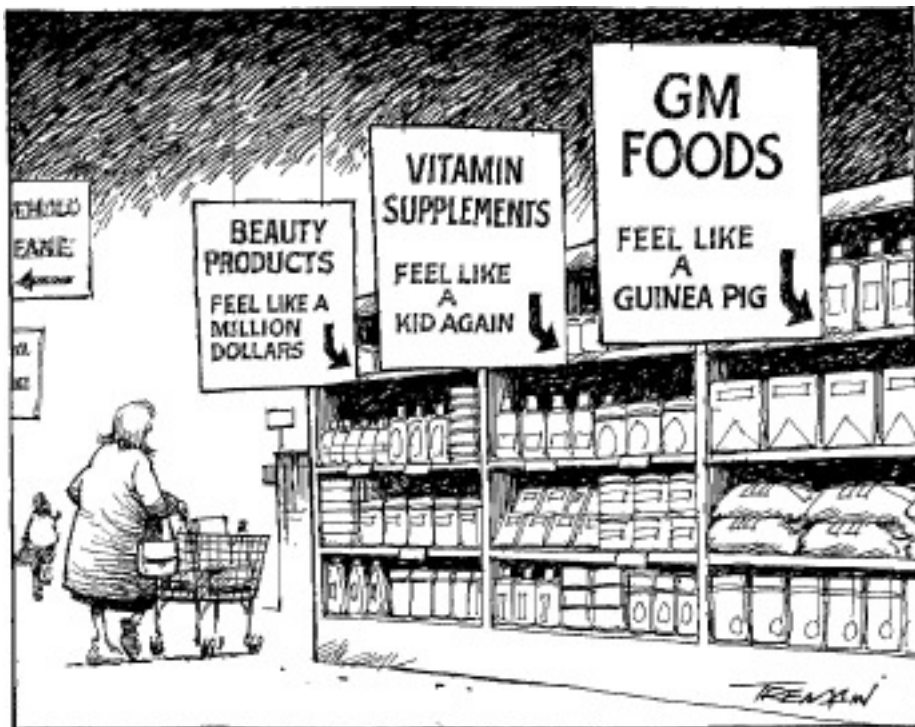
# Sustainable Wellington Net Editorial - 13 Sep 1999

## Bovine Complacency Threatens Our Blood Supplies

There was an interesting article in the Evening Post on August the 20th, it discussed efforts by authorities in North America to keep possible infections of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (CJD or as it is better known Mad Cow Disease) out of blood supplies. Canada and the US are banning blood donations from people who lived in Britain for more than six months between 1980 and 1996 because of possible contamination by CJD. Australia is also considering following their lead. In the mean time they have set up an independent expert committee headed by Professor Colin Master (Australia's foremost expert on CJD) to consider the issue.

The New Zealand Blood Service (NZBS) Medical Director Peter Flanagan said that the NZBS was monitoring international developments, but he said that there was nothing to show the new CJD strain could be transmitted by blood transfusions or products.

This assurance is misleading. There was a special article in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1977 (by Gajdusek, Gibbs & Brown)<sup>1</sup> that warned medical practitioners of the need to take special precautions with CJD patients and in particular warned against using donations of blood from infected persons. The possibility that CJD could be spread by blood transfusion was confirmed in 1978 in guinea pigs infected with CJD by researchers at Yale University. It must be noted that this work of Gajdusek and the Yale researchers was studying the traditional form of CJD rather than what has been termed the New Variant CJD (nvCJD). While nvCJD is clinically and pathologically distinguishable from CJD, it would be very dangerous to assume that this also implies significant differences in transmissibility.



An editorial in the Canadian Medical Association Journal<sup>2</sup> put the issue quite succinctly when it posed the question "Is the absence of evidence of risk evidence of absence of risk?". The writer noted that a number of factors made it difficult to conclude that there was no risk.

Given previous problems such as the issue in 1992 of blood donors being possibly exposed to Hepatitis B and HIV viruses through the use of anaesthetic guns<sup>3</sup>, and the shameful fiasco of Hepatitis C contamination of blood supplies, it would have seemed prudent to adopt a more precautionary approach. For example the UK has introduced a number of measures to treat donated blood to reduce the risk of patients being infected with nvCJD (and various other things)<sup>4</sup>. The UK Health Secretary, Frank Dobson said "while the risks are theoretical, it is better to be safe than sorry". If these measures, including things such as Leucodepletion, are not used here. Why not introduce them? It would seem a sensible precaution until testing procedures are available to determine the presence of the CJD or nvCJD causal agent (the "Rogue Prion") in donated blood.

What is disturbing about this is that it seems to be just another example of the casual approach by NZ health authorities to issues that are potentially a real threat to public health. We are blithely assured that there is no danger in eating genetically modified food, these guardians of our health see no danger in consuming irradiated food or in the myriad of additives now put into our food. They were wrong, disastrously wrong, about thalidomide and asbestos. How long will it be before the deaths of more people prove them wrong again?

## Further Reading

- Barbara, J. & Flanagan, P. *Blood Transfusion Risk: Protecting Against The Unknown*, British Medical journal, 7 Mar 1998, 316, pp. 717-718
- Siegel-Itzkovich, J. *Blood Tests Urged For CJD Carriers*, British Medical Journal, 1997, 314:165
- The [Official Mad-Cow Disease Home Page](#) has a wealth of information

## References

1

Gajdusek, D. et al *Precautions in medical care of, and in handling materials from, patients with Transmissible Virus Dementia (Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease)*, New England Journal of Medicine, Vol 297 No 23, 8 Dec 1977, pp. 1253-1258

2

*Is Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease Transmitted in Blood?*, Canadian Medical Association Journal, Vol 157 No 10, 15 Nov 1997, pp. 1367-1370

3

*Blood Donors Risked Infection*, Evening Post, 9 Sep 1992

4

Warden, J. *Blood Supplies to be Treated to Reduce CJD Risk*, British Medical Journal, 25 Jul 1998, 317:232

Our thanks to Garrick Tremain for permission to use his cartoon

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The best blood will at some time get into a fool or a mosquito -- Austin O'Malley