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Swallowing Anything The Hype Behind Alternative Remedies

by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber

Consumers Union scientist Michael Hansen says he was "pretty horrified" after looking into a question he received recently from Australia. The question came from a man who was trying to obtain a commercial, nonprescription nutritional supplement called "Complete Thymic Formula" from the United States for his girlfriend. The Australian authorities wouldn't let him import it due to fears that it might transmit Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), the human equivalent of mad cow disease.

CJD and mad cow disease both belong to a bizarre group of fatal brain disorders known as "transmissible spongiform encephalopathies" (TSEs), which kill by filling the brains of their victims with microscopic spongelike holes. In England, mad cow disease has reached epidemic levels in the cattle population, and the British beef industry has been devastated by the discovery that human beings are now dying from the

Flack Attack

Thanks to successful lobbying by the U.S. health care industry, a large portion of the U.S. public still lacks health insurance and therefore cannot afford the rising cost of medicines, doctor visits and hospital stays.

Fortunately, some of the same folks who killed health reform have thoughtfully provided you with an "alternative."

In August 1994, while Republican politicians were filibustering against the Clinton administration's health care proposals, Utah's Orrin Hatch took advantage of a nearly-empty Senate floor to slip through a law which prevents the government from regulating dietary supplements. Now you, the consumer, can choose your own regimen from a smorgasbord of touted cures.

Worried about cancer? Try dosing yourself with raw thymus, shark cartilage, Siberian ginseng, vitamins C and E or beta carotene.

Overweight? Try "herbal phen-fen," "dieters' tea," or "Diet Pep" pills which suppress your appetite using a mixture of caffeine, ephedrine and other "natural stimulants."

Impotent? Take your pick: yohimbe, royal jelly, vitamin E, ginseng or amino-acid supplements.

Of course, the evidence regarding efficacy or safety of these supplements is often controversial at best, so essentially you may be participating in an uncontrolled experiment with yourself as the guinea pig.

The promoters of the supplement industry play on public skepticism about conventional health care and its government regulators like the FDA. The fact that much of that skepticism is justified does not, however, mean that the purveyors of "alternatives" are necessarily offering something better.

In reality, what is happening is the emergence of a market-driven health industry in which traditional health care and the alternative sector are able to carve out separate market niches by positioning themselves against each other. As standards of efficacy and safety erode, health consumers are left to choose which sector offers the most convincing imagery.

From the point of view of PR or business, it's a marketer's dream. Everyone gets to sell something, and everyone gets to be a winner—everyone, that is, except the consumer.

disease after eating contaminated meat.

“The authorities had mentioned that human chorionic gonadotrophin from human sources had been linked with an outbreak of CJD cases in Australia,” Hansen said, “so he was asking if presence of raw thymus and pituitary from cows was a problem. I emailed him, told him not to use the stuff and asked for information on where in the U.S. he planned to buy it.”

The company that manufactures “Complete Thymic Formula” is called Preventative Therapeutics. Hansen, who has been closely studying mad cow disease, was appalled to learn that the a daily dose of their product includes 1.2 grams of bovine thymus, 260 mg. of raw spleen, 130 mg raw lymph nodes, 130 mg. raw bone marrow and 20 mg. raw pituitary. The company suggested that this dose could be “doubled” for extra protection.

“If they’d only add raw intestine, brain and eyes they’d have a virtually complete list of all the tissues that have been shown to be TSE positive in infected animals,” Hansen says with considerable irony. “I couldn’t believe the amount of these bovine organs/glands that would be consumed. After all, one half a gram of cow brain fed to a sheep once in its lifetime is enough for it to contract BSE. I was also appalled to see that they recommended giving this supplement to children.”

And Preventative Therapeutics is only one of the supplement makers in the U.S. engaged in similar risky practices. A brief trip to health food stores by *PR Watch* found products including “Raw Adrenal,” which contains bovine pituitary, adrenal extract and adrenal cortex extract; “Raw Pituitary,” which calls itself a “glandular concentrate with synergistic complex” derived from “bovine sources”; “Pituitary Caps” which mix raw pituitary gland with ginseng and gotu kola (a source of caffeine); and “Ultra Female,” a “balanced multi-glandular dietary supplement” that boasts of raw bovine ingredients including ovary, mammary, uterus, adrenal gland, pituitary gland, pancreas, thymus and spleen “in a natural base” of raw brain, eye, stomach and kidney.

There is no scientific proof that you will derive any health advantage from consuming these particular animal glands, and they could well kill you if the cow they came from had a transmissible spongiform encephalopa-



Healing or hurting? These products, sold in health food stores, are all made from the bovine body parts that scientists consider most likely to contain infectious levels of the agent that causes mad cow disease.

thy. Unfortunately, lobbying by the multi-billion-dollar supplement industry has effectively guaranteed that most people will never hear about the risks associated with its products, and it has become damn near impossible to get to the truth about their purported benefits.

ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

In August 1997, researchers reported on a study in western Kentucky which suggested that several people there may have contracted CJD by eating squirrel brains. The news prompted a predictable spate of silly jokes about crazed hillbillies and their eating habits, but the people making those jokes are probably unaware that their own diet may include equally strange substances, some of them included in the pills and powders which are sold in health food stores as natural medicines.

The rapidly growing \$4-billion-a-year supplement industry has cast itself in the role of an “alternative” to the conventional health-care and food industries. Its marketing relies heavily on rhetoric and imagery that evokes a back-to-nature, anti-commercial, rebellious spirit of do-it-yourself healing in defiance of corporate power and government bureaucracies. In reality, however, the supplement industry has more in common with its mainstream counterparts than either would care to admit.

L-tryptophan, for example, was a popular, over-the-counter “natural amino acid” recommended for weight control and relief of insomnia, depression and stress until 1989, when its use was linked to 38 deaths and 1,500 cases of a painful, debilitating blood-and-muscle disorder called eosinophilia-myalgia syndrome. Investigators traced the outbreak to the Showa Denko company, a

\$3-billion-a-year Japanese chemical manufacturer that apparently caused the disease by using a new, genetically-engineered bacteria to manufacture contaminated L-tryptophan.

The L-tryptophan outbreak prompted criticisms of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which had issued warnings about health risks from amino acid food supplements as 1972 but had failed to take enforcement action. In 1990, Congress enacted the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA), which gave the FDA new authority to require accurate labeling information on processed foods as well as food supplements. Under NLEA, all health claims appearing on package labels would have to be supported by "significant scientific agreement." In addition, products would be required to provide uniform information regarding the product's content of vitamins, minerals, fat, calories, sodium and other nutrients.

One TV advertisement depicted mock FDA agents dressed in riot gear, who raided Mel Gibson's house and confiscated his vitamins.

Under the FDA's proposed rules for implementing its powers, supplements marketed simply as nutritional aids would be subject to the same rules as other food products, while substances marketed as disease cures or treatments would be held to the same "safety and effi-

cacy" standard as drugs sold by the pharmaceutical industry.

Nothing in this labelling proposal would have prevented the manufacture or sale of food supplements, but many supplement marketers rely heavily on extravagant health claims with little scientific backing. Rather than submit to FDA standards, they fought back with a successful orchestrated campaign aimed at persuading consumers that the government was trying to take away their right to buy vitamins.

HOLLYWOOD HEROES

In 1992, supplement makers called on the Rogers & Cowan PR firm to help launch the Nutritional Health Alliance, a grassroots PR campaign aimed at fighting what it called "the FDA's bias against preventive medicine and the dietary supplement industry."

Rogers & Cowan, a subsidiary of the Shandwick PR megafirm, is known for its Hollywood connections. Its \$10-million-a-year income makes it the largest PR firm in southern California. It boasts of its ability to link "the corporate and consumer world with the powerful marketing influence and flair of the entertainment industry." Its clients include Microsoft, Baskin-Robbins ice cream, Nabisco foods and the R.J. Reynolds tobacco company along with film studios and movie stars such as Ann Margret and Dustin Hoffman.

The National Health Alliance campaign against the FDA combined Hollywood razzle-dazzle with grassroots anger. One TV advertisement depicted mock FDA

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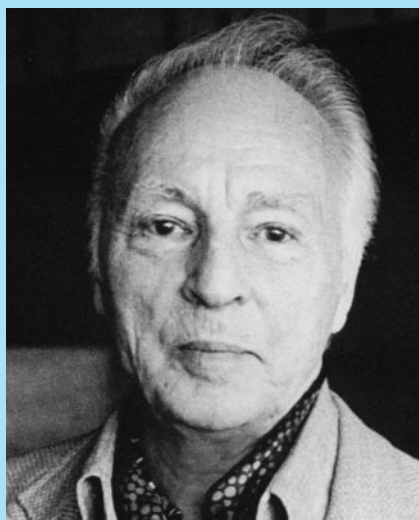
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Did "Rejuvenation" Therapy Kill George Balanchine?

Choreographer George Balanchine is probably the most famous person in the United States who has died from Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (also known as Jakob-Creutzfeldt disease), the human equivalent of mad cow disease. In a retrospective written after Balanchine's death in 1983, one of his physicians speculates that he may have gotten the disease as a result of exposure to animal glands during "rejuvenation" treatments in Switzerland.

"Mr. Balanchine obviously had some kind of neurological disease, but a specific diagnosis could not be reached," recalls Robert D. Wickham, MD, senior attending urologist at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City, in the book, *I Remember Balanchine* by Francis Mason. "It was not until an autopsy was done that the disease could be identified," Wickham says. "Jakob-



Creutzfeldt disease is rare and the diagnosis is ordinarily made only by microscopic postmortem examination of tissues."

Regarding the cause of the disease, Wickham writes that "Mr. Balanchine was very much concerned about staying as youthful as possible. That preoccupation is common in many men as they age. He once told me that in the past he had obtained 'rejuvenation' injections in Switzerland. It is quite possible that he got Jakob-Creutzfeldt disease by way of these injections. Such injections have been available in European health spas and clinics for many years. They oftentimes contain extracts of animal glands such as testicular tissue. . . . If we were certain of how and where Mr. Balanchine got this rare and fatal disease, it would help prevent others from being inoculated with it."

agents dressed in riot gear, who raided Mel Gibson's house and confiscated his vitamins. Gibson joined celebrities such as Whoopi Goldberg, Randy Travis, Sissy Spacek, Laura Dern, Mariel Hemingway and Victoria Principal in making public service announcements claiming that the FDA was trying to block consumer access to vitamins.

At the grassroots level, supplement makers turned to their marketing network. Many supplements are sold through multilevel direct sales operations, hierarchical pyramids in which salespeople at higher levels receive royalties on orders filled by salespeople they recruit. At the top of the pyramid, profits can be quite high, but lower-level salespeople typically settle for a discount on their own purchases, combined with a tiny income from sales to friends and relatives. At all levels of the pyramid, salespeople are encouraged to recruit customers through personal testimonials, which in turn are driven by the dream of rising in the hierarchy and achieving "a lifetime of financial freedom."

These consumers/sales representatives, combined with the country's network of 10,000 health food stores and their customers, provided an army of grassroots campaigners which the supplement manufacturers sought to mobilize through millions of dollars in targeted advertising and flyers calling on supporters to "act now to protect your right to use safe vitamins, minerals, herbs,

and other dietary supplements of your choice." One brochure by the NHA urged consumers to "write to Congress today or kiss your supplements goodbye."

The goal of the campaign was to ensure passage of the 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSLEA), sponsored by Utah Senator Orrin S. Hatch, whose home state is a haven for multilevel marketers and supplement companies. DSLEA forbade FDA from treating food supplements as drugs or food additives and allowed companies to continue making health claims without scientific backing.

Displays were set up at health food stores with copies of letters to be sent to members of Congress. Some stores offered discounts to participants. Others provided free phone lines to call lawmakers. During a nationwide "blackout day," stores refused to sell products that they claimed were threatened. NHA's director warned darkly of a "worldwide conspiracy" led by the "pharmaceutical-medical combine trying to make sure they are not being threatened worldwide by inexpensive, non-patented dietary supplements that will prevent the onset of chronic disease." In the space of 12 months, the campaign generated more than 100,000 letters to members of Congress, more than half of whom responded by signing on to cosponsor Hatch's legislation.

The bill was almost universally opposed, however, by long-time mainstream consumer and health organiza-

tions, including Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America, Center for Science in the Public Interest, the American Association of Retired Persons, the American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, American Dietetic Association and American College of Physicians.

The supplement makers' campaign was a "big lie," according to Bruce Silverglade, director of legal affairs for the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "The consumers who wrote Congress had a financial interest in the matter or were duped into believing the FDA was using the new labeling law to ban their favorite vitamins. . . . People should have the right to try any type of health care that they choose. But what we're talking about is whether the manufacturers have the right to hype supplements on the basis of unreliable scientific information or downright false claims."

According to Jo Reed of the American Association of Retired People, the Hatch bill has made it impossible for the government to take action against a product "unless it has killed enough people to establish a pattern. . . . Why should we have to wait until damage is done?"

FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

Anti-government rhetoric aside, the Nutritional Health Alliance and other supplement lobby groups are themselves closely tied in with the same government and industry groups they purport to oppose. NHA's main lobbyist in Washington is Podesta Associates, headed by Anthony T. Podesta, a former aide to Massachusetts Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

Podesta Associates is a Washington powerhouse PR and lobby firm known for its extensive contacts with both Republicans and Democrats in Congress, and its connections with the Clinton White House are about as close as they get, with Anthony Podesta's brother, John, serving as staff secretary to President Clinton from 1993-95. It works closely with high-tech and telecommunications companies, with clients including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the National Association of Broadcasters, the Newspaper Association of America, and the Unilever Corporation, which is having Podesta Associates lobby on behalf of a fake fat product that Unilever has developed to compete with Proctor & Gamble's Olestra. Podesta is also currently working on behalf of the National Association of Manufacturers to weaken federal air-quality standards. Its clients in the pharmaceuticals industry include the Biotechnology Industry Organization, Genentech, Inc., the Health Industry Manufacturers Association, the

National Food Processors Association and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

Another supplement makers' lobby group, the National Nutritional Foods Association, uses McGuiness & Holch, a longtime lobbyist for the R.J. Reynolds tobacco company headed by former Orrin Hatch chief of staff Kevin McGuiness.

The Utah Natural Products Association uses Parry & Romani Associates, a Washington lobby shop whose connections offer a classic glimpse of Washington-style incestuous influence-peddling.

Parry & Romani clients include the American Tort Reform Association, which lobbies to limit lawsuits over defective medical devices and other products; the Lockheed weapons company; Westinghouse Electric; and the Motion Picture Association of America. Its clients in the pharmaceuticals industry include industry leaders Genentech, Glaxo, Hoffman LaRoche, Pfizer, Pharmacia & Upjohn, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, Schering-Plough, and the Monsanto corporation, for which it recently lobbied to extend patent rights for the company's arthritis drug.

Parry & Romani is headed by Thomas Parry, who, like Keven McGuiness, is a former aide to Orrin Hatch. "The two have a mutually beneficial relationship," reports *Washingtonian* magazine. "Hatch refers Utah companies to Parry, Parry raises money for Hatch, Parry lobbies Hatch, the clients often gain."

The company's other principal, Romano Romani, served on the staff of Arizona Congressman Dennis DeConcini until DeConcini's embarrassment in the Charles Keating savings-and-loan scandal prompted him to decline seeking reelection. Now their roles are reversed, with DeConcini working as a lobbyist on the payroll of Parry & Romani.

The company also conveniently employs Scott Hatch, Orrin's son, who lobbies on behalf of clients such as the National Medical Device Coalition, the Non-Prescription Drug Manufacturers Association, and Herbalife International, a multilevel sales company whose controversial products include diet aids laced with diuretics, laxatives and caffeine. Herbalife products have drawn dozens of citations for safety and regulatory violations in both the United States and Canada. In response to complaints that its products cause cramps, diarrhea, nausea and headaches, company distributors have reassured customers by saying, "That's great, that's the toxins leaving your system." ■

Mad Cow U.S.A.: Could the Nightmare Happen Here?

by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber

The bizarre infectious agent that causes mad cow disease has now produced two U.S. Nobel prizewinners, 22 confirmed deaths in Europe, and fears that thousands more may follow, along with an economic catastrophe for the European meat industry. In the United States, however, it has barely made a dent in the deadly complacency of industry and government regulators.

Mad cow disease, technically called bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE, belongs to a class of fatal brain dementias known as “transmissible spongiform encephalopathies” or TSEs. They have raised enormous concern in Europe because of their unique nature. They are remarkably resistant to disinfection, almost impossible to detect in live animals, 100% fatal, and can take years or even decades to incubate before symptoms emerge, giving the disease ample time to spread to others before it is detected.

“If an evil force could devise an agent capable of damaging the human race, he would make it indestructible, distribute it as widely as possible in animal feed so that it would pass to man, and program it to cause disease slowly so that everyone would have been exposed to it before there was any awareness of its presence,” observes British microbiologist Richard Lacey, a leading critic of his country’s policies for dealing with BSE. These characteristics of the TSEs were what enabled mad cow disease to infect large numbers of British cattle.

A disease this insidious is capable of slipping below the radar of even the most extensive surveillance, yet in the United States complacency has been ensured by government and industry spin control which endlessly harps on the point that mad cow disease has not yet been detected here—even though the U.S. has seen outbreaks of a variety of other TSEs, some of which are in fact unique here or more common than anywhere else in the world.

EVERYTHING’S FINE SO FAR

“BSE is NOT in the United States,” insists an internet web page maintained by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (emphasis in the original). It bases this claim on its postmortem surveillance program, which has examined the brains of more than 5,000 U.S. cattle.

Unfortunately, the TSEs have one more unique characteristic which undermines this argument. Unlike any other known transmissible diseases, they seem to emerge “spontaneously,” even in uninfected populations—a characteristic which can be explained, perhaps, by California biochemist Stanley Prusiner, whose “prion theory” recently won him a Nobel prize.

The prion, Prusiner says, is a new type of infectious agent which, unlike all others, can reproduce without DNA or RNA—the genetic coding materials needed for reproduction by all known life forms, from microbes to plants to human beings.

Prions, by contrast, are sticky, infectious *proteins* which reproduce through another means entirely. They are made of healthy proteins which have gotten bent out of shape—“flipped or folded from their usual conformation” in Prusiner’s words—into a new, deadly shape which enables them to rub up against other healthy proteins and recruit them into also becoming strangely folded.

The prion theory helps explain many of the unusual characteristics of the TSEs. To begin with, it explains how the disease can “spontaneously” emerge through occasional rare mutations that cause the prion protein to change its conformation. In humans, one known mutation of the prion gene causes a rare TSE that runs in families called Fatal Familial Insomnia. Another TSE, called sporadic Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), occurs throughout the world at an observed rate of one case per million people per year, and leading TSE researchers believe that similar diseases occur at similar low rates of incidence in all mammalian species.

“Is BSE endemic? My answer to that is yes,” says Clarence Gibbs, who heads TSE research at the U.S. National Institutes of Health. “All mammalian species thus far tested have the prion protein. . . . Hypothetically, every mammalian species in the world should have its own spongiform encephalopathy, which means that the disease is endemic in all species. You cannot escape it. That’s what we’re discussing here, not whether or not we have recognized the disease in this country *yet*. . . . If the incidence rate is one to two in a million, how many cattle brains do you have to look at before you’re going to find something?” Gibbs asks.

“There’s no way that we can test for the one-in-a-million scenario,” admits Linda Detwiler, the official in charge of USDA’s surveillance program. “To rule it out, every year we’d have to look at 2.3 million brains in the United States. Unless some miracle happens and Congress gives us *all* its money, that’s not going to happen.”

Of course, a one-in-a-million disease isn’t exactly the plague of the century either—*unless* something happens that causes it multiply, which is what happened with England’s outbreak of mad cow disease.

INVULNERABLE KILLERS

Prusiner’s prion theory also may explain why the disease agent is so hard to kill. If he is correct, TSEs can’t be killed at all because they aren’t living organ-

isms to begin with—just proteins. It follows that the only way to disinfect meat contaminated with the infectious agent would be to use something which destroys proteins—which would pretty much negate the whole point to having meat in the first place.

In addition to radiation, TSEs can withstand antibiotics, boiling water, bleach, formaldehyde, and a variety of solvents, detergents and enzymes known to destroy most known bacteria and viruses. In one experiment, the infectious agent remained infective even after exposure for an hour to a temperature of 360 degrees centigrade (680 degrees fahrenheit)—enough heat to melt lead and to reduce a good-sized slab of meat to fine ash. This in turn forced researchers to raise “the disturbing question of whether even incineration can be guaranteed to inactivate the agent.”

Worse yet, testing for the presence of a TSE is much harder than testing for a bacteria, virus or other foreign invader. TSEs produce no signs of inflammation or fever, and no detectable antibody response.

Fortunately for us all, the transmissible spongiform encephalopathies have an Achilles heel. Although they are transmissible, they are usually *difficult* to transmit, especially from one species to another. With the exception of a disease in sheep called “scrapie,” TSEs have therefore only spread widely in populations engaged in unnatural feeding practices.

CANNIBAL MEAT

In humans, the most notable example of this occurred among the Fore society of Papua New Guinea, which experienced a devastating epidemic of a TSE called kuru that spread through the practice of ritual cannibalism during Fore funeral ceremonies. By the time the practice was stopped, kuru had become the leading killer of the Fore people, accounting for more than half of all deaths and threatening extinction of the tribe.

These days, however, unnatural feeding practices are not only practiced but preached as the latest miracles of modern efficiency, progress and cost-containment in the high-tech world of today’s factory farms. These practices are in fact more widespread in the United States than in any other country in the world—including the practice of feeding animal protein byproducts back to other members of their own species, which is what caused the epidemic of mad cow disease in England.

To this day, no one knows what caused the first case of mad cow disease. What we *do* know is that the *spread* of BSE was caused by feeding cows with meat and bone meal—feed supplements derived by grinding and cooking waste animal parts in a process called rendering.

“That is one of the best documented pieces of evidence that we have. I really can’t emphasize it too strongly,” says British TSE researcher Richard Kimberlin. The use of rendered proteins amounted to cow cannibalism, which became the decisive factor enabling the disease to multiply.

“Once infection had become established in cattle, and once they were rendered or their waste tissues were rendered and entered the feed chain, then of course you had the potential for exponentially building up an increasing reservoir of BSE infection,” Kimberlin explains.

Moreover, the slow incubation period of the disease meant that by the time the British even realized they had a problem, the disease had already multiplied out of control. The first study which linked BSE to rendering was carried out at a time when the country had only seen 200 cases. In the subsequent eight years, another 160,000 cases surfaced, and studies estimate that up to 1.5 million *undiagnosed* cases may have occurred in cattle that were slaughtered for human consumption before symptoms started showing.

That is why Europe is so alarmed by the 22 human deaths that have been observed so far. If those 22 became infected in the early years when only a few cows were sick, how many thousands more were exposed later and may be silently incubating the disease?

“It is impossible to predict the size of the epidemic—it may only involve hundreds, but it could be Europe-wide and become a disaster of biblical proportions,” says leading prion researcher John Collinge. “We have to face the possibility of a disaster with tens of thousands of cases. We just don’t know if this will happen, but what is certain is that we cannot afford to wait and see. We have to do something, right now. We have to find the answers, not only to the questions of the nature of the disease, but to find a way to develop an effective treatment.”

OUTBREAK IN AMERICA’S DAIRYLAND

In the United States, some of the most disturbing questions about the disease have come from University of Wisconsin Professor Richard Marsh, whose research strongly suggests that a strain of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy may already be present in U.S. cattle. In 1985, Marsh investigated an outbreak of “transmissible mink encephalopathy” which occurred in Stetsonville, Wisconsin. The affected mink had all been fed a diet of meat from downer dairy cows, and Marsh’s laboratory tests provided strong evidence that downer cows were the source of the disease.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Marsh faced harassment and threats of lawsuits from the meat industry in

response to his warnings about the need to end the practice of feeding rendered cows back to cows. Today, those warnings have been vindicated, but neither the USDA nor the meat industry has shown any willingness to accept his conclusions that a TSE is already present in the U.S. cattle population.

And cows are not the only species about which we have to worry. In early 1997, a federal veterinarian named Masuo Doi talked with the Government Accountability Project (GAP), a Washington, DC-based nonprofit organization which exists to protect government whistleblowers from harassment, intimidation and firing. In 1979, Doi was among a group of USDA inspectors in upstate New York who investigated an outbreak of a mysterious disease in pigs with symptoms and pathology that closely resembled a TSE.

When the British BSE announcement hit the headlines in 1996, Doi was stunned to see video footage on the evening news that showed cows staggering just the way his pigs had. Fearful that U.S. pigs might already be carrying a spongiform disease, he and other government colleagues spent the subsequent year pleading with USDA officials to conduct an investigation.

“Although USDA has been aware of the dormant study and its role for nearly a year, it has not acted on it,” said GAP Food Safety Director Felicia Nestor, who charged that USDA officials were not only dragging their feet but actively misinforming public interest groups, the media, and even the national association of federal veterinarians.

On repeated occasions, officials had said that they were not concerned because BSE experts had looked at slides of pig brains from the 1979 study and said there was “no problem.” In reality, the USDA never sent any slides to England.

“Agency officials repeatedly misrepresented scientists’ investigations and conclusions to consumer groups and government employees and neglected to keep other agencies also working on TSE issues informed,” Nestor said.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Michael Hansen, a scientist who works for Consumers Union, points also to two separate epidemiological studies that link consumption of pork to Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. One study, published in 1973, surveyed past eating habits of CJD patients and found that over a third were reported to have eaten brains.

“Clearly, far fewer than one-third of the general population consumes brains, so there is an overabundance of brain eaters among the CJD patients,” Hansen said.

“Sources at USDA tell us that approximately one million animal brains are removed for human consumption every year. If each brain eater consumed only one brain a year, this would mean that less than 1% of the population consumes brains.”

Even more disturbing was the fact that some 71% of the CJD patients who ate brains were reported to have a “preference for hog brains.”

The second study, published in 1985, looked for correlations between CJD and consumption of 45 different food items which ranged from raw oysters to hot dogs. Nine items showed a statistical correlation, six of which came from pigs: roast pork, ham, hot dogs, pork chops, smoked pork, and scrapple.

“The present study indicated that consumption of pork as well as its processed products (e.g., ham, scrapple) may be considered as risk factors in the development of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease,” the authors concluded. “While [a TSE] has not been reported in pigs, a subclinical form of the disease or a pig reservoir for the [TSE] agent might conceivably be present.”

“The fact that evidence from a pig study and human studies both point to an unrecognized TSE in pigs is very disturbing,” Hansen said. “That’s why the FDA’s rule prohibiting feeding of meat and bone meal is inadequate. The language of the rule states that you can’t use protein from any mammalian tissue in ruminant feeds, but they’ve created a taxonomic loophole for pigs by excluding them from the category of ‘mammals.’ Not only is this arbitrary and contrary to fact, it sends a dangerous message by suggesting that pigs are safer than other mammals—even though the 1979 Doi study tells us that pigs may *already* be infected with a TSE-like disease.”

“The feeding of swine protein to swine should be prohibited, at least until there is scientific evidence available on the possibility that swine are or not able to transmit a TSE agent,” commented Dr. Karl Lonberg-Holm in written comments to the FDA. “Consider the following scenario: A pig spontaneously develops a TSE agent. This animal is within one of the large factory-like businesses that have more than 100,000 animals and which is vertically integrated so that the same corporation handles all operations from feed production to marketing pork. The offal

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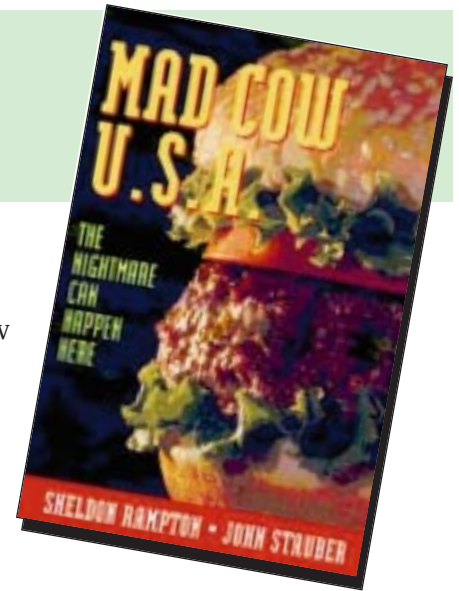
Could the Nightmare Happen Here?

by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber

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—Lois Marie Gibbs,
author of *Dying from Dioxin*

"It's not just cows that are mad—so are our so-called 'consumer protectors.' You'll be mad as hell too after reading this dynamite book."
—Jim Hightower, radio talk show host and author of *There's Nothing in the Middle of the Road but Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos*

"It can happen here! Rampton and Stauber have provided real 'food for thought' in this chilling, revealing book about what really goes on behind the scenes in the meat industry. Every American family ought to read this book."
—Jeremy Rifkin, author of *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture*

"Incurable, unstoppable, threatening to big business: that's mad cow disease, but also, luckily for us, the wit and investigative will of Rampton and Stauber. Whether you eat meat or just the ground-up news fed to the public by the corporate media, you'd have to be crazy not to read *Mad Cow U.S.A.*"

—Laura Flanders,
author of *Real Majority, Media Minority: The Cost of Sidelining Women in Reporting*

"Gripping . . . important . . . highly recommended."
—*Library Journal*

of the pig, when rendered to protein meal, might infect many other animals within a month or so. Within a year there may be 100,000 infected animals that have already been sent to the market and consumed by the public. . . . If the latent period for the disease is long enough in swine, no overt symptoms would have been detected among pigs at the same time that much of the human population of North America had already become infected."

DEER AND ELK

The United States, moreover, is the world headquarters for yet another TSE—chronic wasting disease (CWD) in free-ranging deer and elk. With the exception of a single case reported in Canada, CWD has only been observed in northwestern Colorado and Wyoming.

Until 1996, CWD was believed to be extremely rare, but when the Colorado Division of Wildlife actually conducted a study, they found that about 6.5 percent of deer and 1.5 percent of elk shot by hunters in the area tested positive for the disease. In September 1997, the Division began further study by requiring big game hunters to submit the heads of deer and elk harvested during the coming season.

When asked whether the disease posed a risk to humans, Division veterinarian Mike Miller admitted in 1996 that "we can't make any absolute guarantees about this or any other disease." Subsequently, he seems to have become more adept at expressing his uncertainty in language that minimizes the sound of risk.

"If there were a concern that this poses a serious threat to human health, the hunting season would be closed," Miller said in announcing the new upcoming study, adding that no evidence has been found linking human TSEs with the consumption of venison.

Of course, until a year ago no evidence had been found suggesting that many deer even *had* the disease. Researchers have no idea how long the disease might have been this widespread, so the absence of evidence for human risk is not entirely reassuring.

As a safety precaution, Miller urged hunters to take basic precautions when field dressing game, including wearing rubber gloves, minimizing handling of brain and spinal tissues and washing hands afterward. He also advised hunters against consuming brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen and lymph nodes of animals harvested in northwestern Colorado. ■

Infocom Helps Flacks to Help Themselves

by Joel Bleifuss for *PR Watch*

One quick way to gauge the power of the public relations industry is to plop the *National PR Pitch Book* on a scale. The 1996 edition weighs four pounds and fills 706 pages. The *Pitch Book* bills itself as “the insider’s placement guide to the most influential journalists in America.” It offers the names of these journalists, all 30,000 of them, along with their addresses, phone and fax numbers.

The *Pitch Book* is published by the Infocom Group, which also puts out six newsletters for the “media relations industry.” Media relations is a big business, and Infocom caters to the kind of organizations for which the \$425 cost of a *Pitch Book* is small change.

The *Pitch Book* also provides first-person information about the PR proclivities of these 30,000 top journalists. Looking up *The Nation*, for example, you would learn that editor Katrina Vanden Heuvel describes her publication “as offering an alternative and idealistic vision of politics.” Says Vanden Heuvel, “We are the voice of the liberal community around the world.”

Over at *Mother Jones*, senior editor Christopher Orr informs the reader that he has little use for the PR industry. “To date, I cannot recall any PR communication that has resulted in a story with us, so if you’re unsure of whether to send us something, your best bet is not to.” *Sierra* magazine’s managing editor Marc Lecard asks that PR pros not send him stories about “hotels and golf courses on drained wetland.”

On the mainstream media side of things, looking up the *20/20* TV news show reveals that Erin Mezquida “coordinates John Stossel’s enterprise and family segments.” Mezquida turn-ons are “government excesses that restrict innovative enterprise, small business and civil liberties.”

And at the *New York Times*, Jane Brody informs the PR industry: “My files are my brains I ought to have them insured.” The pitch book gives detailed advice about how to get what you want into Brody’s brain.

“It may not get used for five years [but if you’re in my ‘brain’] sometimes a release will trigger an idea for an article or column,” she says. Her turnoffs, according to the *Pitch Book*, include “ear-splitting Muzak on your hold system when she calls you back.”

“I find that to be one of the most irritating aspects of life as a journalist,” says Brody, who apparently spends quite a bit of time phoning flacks. “If you have any sense, you’ll shut that thing off.”

The Infocom Group also publishes the *Bulldog Reporter*, a “media placement newsletter for PR professionals,” which comes out 24 times a year and costs subscribers \$389. *BR* publishes west, east and central

editions, providing up-to-date information about how to pitch a story to specific journalists.

Each issue of the *Bulldog Reporter* features “beat charts” that provide “detailed maps of editorial responsibilities, including direct-dial and fax numbers and e-mail addresses” that help you “get instant access to the reporters covering your topic.”

Those pros who wish to push softer news stories, might consider a subscription to Infocom’s *Lifestyle Media-Relations Reporter*, which provides information such as the “three things you must know about the new leadership at *The New York Times* ‘Style’ section before you pick up the phone.” (With an introductory offer it costs \$297 for 24 issues.) “Best of all,” brags Infocom, “top management will love the increased ink and air you help them score.”

If you are having no luck selling your story, the *Bulldog Reporter* also offers investigative services: “Stonewalled by a reporter? Let BR investigate your toughest hit. If your best pitching efforts fail with a certain editor or reporter, even when you know you have the perfect story, tell us about it—we’ll investigate and you’ll learn exactly how to revise your pitching strategy.”

THESE ARE MORAL QUESTIONS

Perhaps the investigators also led the seminar at Infocom conferences titled “Spying on the Press—Is it ethical, is it useful?” The promo line reads: “Learn how it is done by the master spies.”

Of course, there is only so much you can find out about a journalist through *Bulldog Reporter* or the *PR Pitch Book*. Nothing succeeds like getting to connect with a journalist in the flesh. For that purpose, Infocom runs a continuing series of regional day-long conferences titled “Inside the Newsroom.”

In September 1996, I attended their Chicago conference to learn “how top Chicago media work with PR professionals.” It was co-sponsored by *PR Newswire*, which bills itself as “the world’s largest press communications network, providing satellite transmission of news releases—in minutes, in full text, as written—to more than 2,000 newsrooms.” *PR Newswire* also owns “Profnet,” an email service which delivers journalists’ queries to customers.

My day began with a session titled “Problems in Pitching Major Business Broadcast News.”

Bert Gering, senior business news producer at CNN, told the 38 public relations pros who each paid hundreds of dollars to sit in the audience to keep their pitch succinct: “It doesn’t make sense for you to try to tell me why the story is important because we can figure that out in 30 seconds.” He also requested that stories

Columbia Books Publishes Resources for Flack Trackers

Columbia Books publishes the best easily available information regarding lawyers, PR operatives, lobbyists and industry trade associations. Its directories are detailed, accurate and annually updated. We especially recommend the four directories described and priced below. If you can't afford to purchase each year's directory, ask your local library to stock them, especially *Washington Representatives*. For more information call Columbia Books at (202) 898-0662, or visit their website at <<http://www.d-net.com/Columbia>>.

Washington Representatives: Who Does What for Whom in the Nation's Capital. Includes more than 15,500 lobbyists, governmental affairs representatives, and special interest advocates in the nation's capital, and the causes and clients they represent, along with contact information, foreign agent registration numbers, and federal lobbyist indicators. Listings are

organized by client and by representative, as well as indexed by subject and foreign interest. Available each spring: \$85.

National Directory of Corporate Public Affairs. Tracks the public/government affairs programs of some 2,000 major U.S. corporations and lists the 15,000 people who run them. Includes corporate foundations, federal and state lobbyists, contract lobbyists, and PACs. Available early each year: \$85.

National Trade and Professional Associations of the United States. Lists 7,500 industry trade associations and trade unions. Contact information, convention schedules, membership/staff size, and background information. Available early each year: \$85.

State and Regional Associations of the United States. Similar to the above national directory, but state-based. Available early each year: \$65.

pitched at him have "two sides." He said, "One side of a story doesn't make a story. It makes a commercial."

A member of the audience asked: "What is the best procedure on trying to sell you on something?" Scott Cohn, a national correspondent for CNBC, responded, "Mostly it is a waste of all of our time." Another questioner chipped in: "Something in my background tells me I should tell you anyway." To which Cohn replied, "I don't want to shut you off. Shoot us a fax. We read all the faxes."

Both speakers were forthright and honest in giving their opinions and answering questions, and hence seemed rude to some of the assembled public relations people. "They were assholes," said an equally plain-speaking PR rep from a major gas station chain.

HELPFUL HINTS

At the seminar titled, "How to Work with the Financial and Banking Press," John Schmeltzer, who covers banking and economics for the *Chicago Tribune*, adopted a more kindly, if condescending, tone. "Make the pitch," says Schmeltzer. "I have no problem with PR professionals."

Schmeltzer does have some "complaints," however, and hectoring his audience he enumerated them. First, identify yourself in all communications. Second, "Don't assume we don't know anything about the companies you represent. I deal with one professional who assumes I don't know anything." Third, don't expect the *Tribune* to work through the PR professional if they choose to do the story.

Chris Graham, of *Bloomberg Business News*, added a complaint of his own: PR companies that don't keep

their files updated. "It seems to me that PR firms should be checking if that person is still there," said Graham. He also advises PR professionals to develop relationships with journalists. "Get to know that person and that person will get to know you," said Graham. "Those become long-term relationships. Keep up the relationships. Keep open your relationships and keep information flowing back and forth. If you have a problem with a story. Pick up the phone and complain."

THINK GLOBAL

Journalists representing the major business news wire services were featured on a panel titled, "How to sell your story through the wires." According to Joe Winski, Chicago bureau chief of *Bloomberg Business News*, the financial market news services want public relations professionals to "think big, think global, think news that investors can use to move a company's stocks and bonds."

Kevin Pendley, Chicago Mercantile Exchange bureau chief for Bridge News (formerly Knight Ridder) told the audience: "Once you find out what our product is all about, you are probably not going to send us save the whales press releases." He also asked the pros to "help us guard against fraud. Hoaxes are real. Just understand we are working together here."

A member of the audience asked, "Where do labor unions fit within what you do?"

The price of labor, like the price of hog bellies, is significant to the financial community. Janie Gabbett, the midwest news editor at Reuters America Inc. said that labor is "important in general" since "everytime there is a strike it is a market mover."

Defending Hot Air: TASSC Takes on Global Warming

The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition is an industry-funded PR front group run by the APCO public relations firm which works to hang the label of “junk science” on environmentalists. TASSC is using a thousand-dollar “Global Warming Sweepstakes” to generate letters to President Clinton on the issue of global warming.

“To enter the Global Warming Sweepstakes, a contestant must visit the Junk Science Home Page (<http://www.junkscience.com>) and, according to contest rules, send an e-mail to President Clinton expressing an opinion whether the U.S. should sign a treaty limiting emission of so-called ‘greenhouse gases,’ ” announced a Nov. 12, 1997 TASSC news release.

Although the rules state that “It does not matter which position is expressed,” the Junk Science Home Page offers assistance in the form of a model letter urging Clinton “NOT to sign a global warming treaty,” along with dozens of “informational articles,” all of which ridicule the idea that global warming is a serious problem. Some sample titles:

- “Kangaroo Court: The Working Group on Public Health and Fossil Fuel Combustion,” explains the issue as follows: “A kangaroo court of junk

scientists predicts that 8 million people will die during 2000 to 2020 from particulate matter air pollution associated with fossil fuel, unless the world limits greenhouse gas emissions to levels advocated by European nations.”

- “Apocalypse Not,” by science writer Gary Taubes, argues that “Predictions that global warming will spark epidemics have little basis.”
- “The Sky Isn't Falling and the Sea Isn't Rising,” by S. Fred Singer, says that “Global-warming devotees have been making alarmist predictions about the rising sea levels they think will follow an increase in the earth's average temperatures.”

Industry PR about the global warming problem seems to be succeeding. On Nov. 10, the Associated Press reported that “a global poll surveying environmental attitudes in 24 countries suggests Americans are the most skeptical of the need for drastic and potentially costly steps to minimize climate change. . . . Most respondents worldwide endorsed immediate strong action, but half the respondents in the United States said no major action should be taken until more facts were known.” ■

Winski criticized the United Auto Workers union for being too “button down” and said the union is thereby “giving up spin control” and “alienating people who have a receptive ear.”

At lunch I sought out the guy with the question about labor unions. He was Mark Russo of Valerie Denny Communications, a Chicago PR firm. Its founder, a former steelworker, has been doing public interest public relations since working in the press office of the late Chicago Mayor Harold Washington.

Russo was attending the conference with fellow account representative Cheryl Bardoe. Russo and Bardoe worked at the 1996 Chicago Democratic Convention, flacking for, among other clients, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. As part of a campaign to get affordable housing built in the south Loop, Russo and Bardoe got national “air and ink” for the “Tree Man,” a homeless man dressed up as a tree who followed Mayor Richard Daley around town during the convention asking “If I were a tree would you care about me?” (Tree planting is one of the mayor’s civic passions.)

“We are a little different from the other people at the conference because we aren’t product oriented, our

news is really issue oriented,” said Bardoe. I asked her how her work differs from what somebody would do in public relations at Philip Morris. “I am not doing the same job as somebody at Philip Morris. I don’t want to put anybody down, but I think that in the public relations industry it is important to believe in the stories you are pitching. I don’t think that I would be able to work for Philip Morris. The people that I represent here are the people who are the least likely to get in the media.”

Bardoe found the Infocom conference valuable. “The best thing that I got was meeting the reporters who might be interested in the stories we are working on and hearing more in-depth what they are interested in,” said Bardoe. For example, she has been in touch with a reporter at the CBS bureau trying to influence the welfare debate by getting air time for a family on welfare.

But pros like Russo and Bardoe from firms like Valerie Denny were outnumbered 100 to one at this Infocom conference. The \$400 price of admission undoubtedly keeps public interest advocates from sending a representative to the conference, if they even found out about it in the first place. ■