

RESPONDING TO A CRISIS

BY KAREN SLITER

Some would consider it an opportunity, and it was. Others, just as correctly, would call it a tragedy.

It was the spring of 2001, and the United Kingdom had just diagnosed an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease — an acute, contagious disease of cattle, sheep and deer that is also transmissible to humans. Caused by a virus, FMD is characterized by fever and blisters in the mouth and around the hoofs and can be fatal.

Within days of the initial diagnosis, the situation escalated into a crisis, severely straining the country's agricultural and regulatory infrastructure. In fact, the epidemic would ultimately cost the U.K. an estimated 8 billion pounds (approximately \$12 billion).

As a veterinarian with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, I normally spend most of my time resolving animal health trade issues in Central and Eastern Europe. But I also monitor outbreaks of animal disease around the world and help prevent their introduction to the United States. So 14 other American vets and I were asked to cross the Atlantic to help British officials.

The outbreak was less than a week old, and we had little idea what to expect. (For several of my colleagues, this was their first trip overseas so they had to scramble just to get passports.) FMD was eradicated from the U.S. in 1929, so most of us had never seen a case of it outside a laboratory setting. But that was about to change in a big way.

Upon arrival, we were given a short briefing and

split into three different teams. Earlier budget cuts had led to decreased numbers of U.K. government veterinarians, so the most critical need was for us to inspect animals for signs of the disease. Accordingly, four colleagues and I traveled to the Worcester field office to work alongside the English veterinarians who were battling this horrible disease. After arriving at the train station and renting a car, we drove off, gingerly, on the “wrong” side of the road to check the farms on our list.

Helping Farmers Cope

At the very first farm we visited, we quickly diagnosed FMD. Soon, I was arranging for the slaughter and burial of 4,000 sheep and 20 cattle. I helped the family with special permits so they could drive to the store and bring their children to school despite being effectively confined to home, and I advised them on how to prevent spreading the disease.

The family was ostracized by some in their small rural community. The children were told at school that other children couldn't play with them because their family's farm had FMD. They all stayed in the house while the slaughtering was done, for there was nowhere else to go. The pubs were all closed, and the social support structure of this and many other small farming communities was unraveling under the pressure of trying to prevent FMD from spreading even farther.

The farmers told me that the worst part was the silence of isolation. What do you do with your time when you've spent the last 30 years of your life getting up and taking care of your animals, only to have every

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one of them destroyed? How do you even consider starting over again?

One family told me I was like their “funeral director.” They said I helped them through the grieving process that accompanies any death, even if it is “just” the death of one’s animals. But then I had to move on, for there were many more farms to visit and more cases of FMD to diagnose. I was happy on the rare occasions when I could say the animals did not look like they had FMD — yet.

No Options

On the more typical farms, where the news was not so good, I sat long hours with weatherbeaten farmers over a cup of coffee or tea while they contemplated how and if their farm was going to survive and what was going to happen next. When a farmer seemed particularly distraught, I called family members to try to arrange for someone to stay with him. I gave everyone the number of the local suicide prevention hotline and my cell phone number, and told them to call me anytime.

Some did. They called me when they couldn’t take their cattle and sheep from winter to summer pasture because of the movement bans, and they pleaded with me to arrange for the slaughter of their prize breeding stock because they were calving in flooded fields and the newborn calves and lambs were drowning and there was nothing they could do about it. These animals, like many others, were not sick. But the movement restrictions so essential to stopping the spread of the disease meant that some animals could no longer be cared for in a humane fashion. So we began killing animals for welfare reasons.

At one farm, I oversaw the slaughter of an entire flock of purebred sheep, each worth thousands of dollars, to which the appraiser could only say that this was

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an “irreparable loss” to the breed. All I could do was make sure the killing was humane, for there was no option: it was just us in the face of overwhelming death and destruction. I tried to help the farmer and his family through those long, hard days, and they helped me as well.

The days and weeks quickly became a blur. In all, over eight million animals were destroyed during the FMD outbreak. A third of these animals were killed for welfare reasons. Funeral pyres dotted the countryside.

Looking for Scapegoats

Naturally, everyone we met wanted to know what was going on, and whether we would be successful in eradicating the disease. Interestingly, they all assumed that someone had done something wrong, or failed to do something, and was therefore to blame for the epidemic.

The media were particularly interested in obtaining comments from the “foreign vets.” I was suddenly a minor media star, interviewed by numerous news programs. I even appeared on the CBS national news! I often had to fend off leading questions from the British press, which would typically request an interview right before a high government official was scheduled to give a press conference on FMD. “And Dr. Sliter, what would you do differently than the English have done in trying to eradicate FMD?”

Finally, it was time to leave and let the next group of American veterinarians take our places. In all, over 200 U.S. vets would travel to the U.K. during 2001 to help their British colleagues eradicate FMD, a tangible indication of the support the United States gave the U.K. during this national crisis.

We returned to our regular assignments at APHIS and elsewhere, but continued following the reports. We celebrated the U.K.’s success when FMD was officially eradicated from the United Kingdom on Sept. 30, 2001. ■