

Falling on DEFRA ears

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Luckily foot 'n' mouth disease hardly ever affects humans clinically. The economic effects are of course extremely serious. The good news is that so far only a few hundred cattle, sheep and pigs have been slaughtered.

Bearing in mind that the laboratories run by government, its agencies and the Institutes it supports, contain brucellosis, anthrax, salmonella, clostridium botulinum, and (possibly) smallpox, this has been a salutary scare.

Will any lessons be learned from this?

We must certainly hope so, but do not be too sanguine. This was an accident waiting to happen which was anticipated by those in charge.

So how could it have happened?

The reports (one by the HSE, and an independent one by Professor Brian Spratt of Imperial College) agree on two major facts.

The first is sad, and reflects weaknesses in human nature. Secure doors were held open (politely) for colleagues to walk through. This did not cause any accidents, but complicated clarification of what had happened afterwards. Similarly the log for lorries entering the site was often illegible. Again this caused no accident, but made it doubly difficult to track vehicle movements after the event.

There were two biological safety officers who did not talk often enough, did not convene enough meetings to engage staff, and were not successful enough in securing funds from the site manager to correct problems.

Anyone who has run any facility, whether containing powerful pathogens, or merely selling postage stamps will recognise these all too normal behaviours.

However, there is also a fundamental structural problem which even in the

absence of such human foibles guaranteed that the site would be unsafe.

Once upon a time, Government and its departments decided what research they needed, and usually owned the facility in which to carry it out. Occasionally it was necessary to commission a contractor to carry it out.

In the 1970s Lord Rothschild was asked to investigate whether this was the best way to get value for money, and concluded it was not.

Laboratories were 'privatised' or turned into 'agencies' or put at arm's length from the department and minister to whom they had once owed allegiance.

They were then told to compete for business. The problem here was that their main competitors were universities. At that time universities had little idea of the Full Economic Cost of doing the research in question. Indeed they received many hundreds of millions of taxpayers' pounds from the University Grants Committee, later to become HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England), which ensured that they had no motive for doing so. Many small businesses, particularly in engineering, used to complain that they were being undercut whenever they bid for public contracts by universities who were subsidised by their taxes.

Laboratories owned by Government departments or Research Councils didn't complain too much either, because they too received funds to support their infrastructure.

In the early days, departments such as MAFF (later to become DEFRA) would guarantee a 'commission' which would ensure a level of funding in exchange for an agreed programme of work.

DEFRA became increasingly convinced that a university could and would carry out the research less expensively, because the university wanted both



the money and the prestige. It could afford to undercut any organisation which was attempting to charge FEC.

And so ten years ago, the 'safety net' of the commission was removed, and Institutes had little choice if they wished to retain the contracts. They had to cut costs to the bone, and in practice that meant reducing overheads such as maintenance of grounds, facilities, and equipment.

Many at Pirbright, and those who visited the site in an official capacity, knew that the drains (and lots of other features, according to reports) were well below the standard of a Category 4 containment laboratory. But everyone simply passed the buck.

Sir Keith O'Nions, the Director General of the Research Councils, and ultimately responsible for IAH, recently told the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee that he had been unable to identify any specific infrastructure flaws in university laboratories.

Senior civil servants know that if you tell a minister the true cost of a project (the Dome, the Scottish Parliament, the Olympic Games), it will then be rejected out of hand. They also know that the minister responsible for the 'underestimate' will have moved on long before the chickens come home to roost.

If a Select Committee wants to get its teeth into something meaty when it returns in October, it could do worse than to find out why no-one has an interest in telling the truth about the true cost of doing frontline scientific research of national importance.