Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, persistent organic pollutants, and the achievable utopias

Does it make much sense to ask your butcher whether a piece of beef contains the bovine spongiform encephalopathy prion protein? I doubt it. Essentially—but not solely, as explained below—because it is unlikely that any prion protein test, even if an efficient test, will ever be able to detect it was available for use on a daily basis. By contrast, it is perfectly sensible to ask your butcher, grocer, or supermarket manager how much the meat, fish, or milk you buy harbour environmental chemical agents such as the pesticide residue DDE, polychlorinated biphenyls, hexachlorobenzene, or hexachlorocyclohexane, which comprise the bulk of persistent organic pollutants in humans. 1 We largely absorb such chemicals through a wide variety of foods, and most of us store them in fat tissues.2 Ubiquitous throughout the planet, persistent organic pollutants are a true systemic contamination.3 They travel through the airs and waters as fast as through the global goods’ distribution channels. And they travel through our blood.

To dismiss the worry we should not care about bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Sure, serious encephalopathy related issues remain unsolved; notably, the potential link between prion contaminated food and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. However, while persistent organic pollutants exposure is widespread throughout the Earth (firm evidence, see references),4 exposure to bovine spongiform encephalopathy prions is—much lower on that scale (evidence indeterminate). And sure, the politics of “mad cow disease”.5 But we are a bit tired of blaming liberalism’s laissez faire, aren’t we? So, any ideas for long term global and local political action? Here we go: one achievable utopia.

To define, we mean to ask what, specifically? Like global public action? Here we go: one achievable utopia.

“Long term” meaning that the structural changes needed to get rid of prions and persistent pollutants are not very high on the social agenda—much as they would help prevent all sorts of public health and environmental crises. Many efforts of public health and ecology are failing because we barely perceive the social imagination. Human health and ecological targets won’t hardly be achieved unless we seduce the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens. Real changes in food and environmental policies will not occur unless public health and ecology help draw utopias that entice citizens. Worry to say, whoever did it for them, it did pretty well, in terms of impacting the social agendas. And of course, they did badly. But we’re doing pretty bad as well. We talk risks, prions, pollutants. We say so little about the dreams, and so softly, and out of tune. About the real dreams, the achievable utopias.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Tim Lang, Joan Benach, Ana M García, and Ekhine Zumaeta for their criticisms to earlier versions of this paper.

Miquel Porta
Institut Municipal d’Investigació Mèdica (IMIM), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain, and School of Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Correspondence to: Professor M Porta, Institut Municipal d’Investigació Mèdica, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Carrer del Alguacil 80, E-08003 Barcelona, Spain, mporta@imim.es

References

24 Steinberg FM. It is time to dismiss calls to ban DDT. BMJ 2001;322:676.