BOOK REVIEW

Deadly Feasts: Tracking the Secrets of a Terrifying New Plague. BY RICHARD RHODES. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997. 259 pages. \$24.00 hardcover.

After reading Richard Rhodes' new book *Deadly Feasts*, I was thankful I had stopped eating meat in the late 1970s. This book does a masterful job of presenting an extremely interesting, complex, and as-yet-unsolved disease process, the transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). Readers will be familiar with the most publicized variant of this disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad-cow disease) but will be equally intrigued to read about the first human TSE, *kuru*.

Rhodes begins with a chilling picture of endocannibalism among the Fore, a remote tribe in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Kuru gets its name from the Fore word for trembling, one of the disease's physical signs. The first scientists to evaluate this human disease were Carleton Gajdusek and Vincent Zigas. Their early work contributed much to the epidemiologic understanding of kuru. The mystery unfolds further in Gajdusek's later collaboration with others studying a similar condition in animals, known as *scrapie*.

The book tries to link, historically and epidemiologically, one form of TSE with another (from scrapie to BSE to Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease), a link that continues to be met with scientific skepticism. More fascinating is the research effort to define the causative agent of these conditions. Initially, these were de-

scribed as slow virus diseases owing to the lengthy incubation time, and viruses were thought to be the etiologic agents of these conditions. But the infectious proteins discovered over the past decade, known as *prions*, now appear more likely to be the causative agents. Stanley Prusiner, the recent Nobel prize recipient, has done much of the research in this area. Prions appear to have no inherent nucleic acid structure and are highly resistant to desiccation, a factor that the book implies contributed to the entrance of this condition into the food chain. Even more interesting is that these proteins are present in normal brain tissue as well as diseased tissue; the exact mechanism for transformation from benign to deadly is still unknown.

Those whose interests are infectious diseases, scientific research, public health, epidemiology, and medicine in general will relish the interplay between research information, public health recommendations for prevention, and governmental action (or nonaction). Epidemiologically there is evidence that change in animal husbandry practices, laxity of agricultural regulations, and human complacency contributed to the outbreak of BSE in the United Kingdom. The continuing reports of cases of BSE in country after country prompted the United States to ban cattle and cattle products from the European economies. Does that really make our meat or ourselves safe?

The Institute of Medicine, in its book *Emerging Infections: Microbial Threats to Health in the United States* (National Academy Press, 1992), classifies emerging threats according to proposed factors of emergence. One of these, technology and industry, appears to play a major role in the transmission of the spongiform encephalopathies. As Rhodes mentions in the book, BSE is "already here, in native form, a low-level infection that industrial cannibalism could amplify to epidemic scale. We still feed meat-and-bone meal to cattle. And an estimated seventy-seven million Americans eat beef every day."

Deadly Feasts will give the reader definite food for thought. Complacency and ignorance in the era of emerging infectious disease is a deadly combination.—**CARRIE HORWITCH, MD, MPH**, VA Puget Sound Health Care Systems, Seattle, Wash.

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