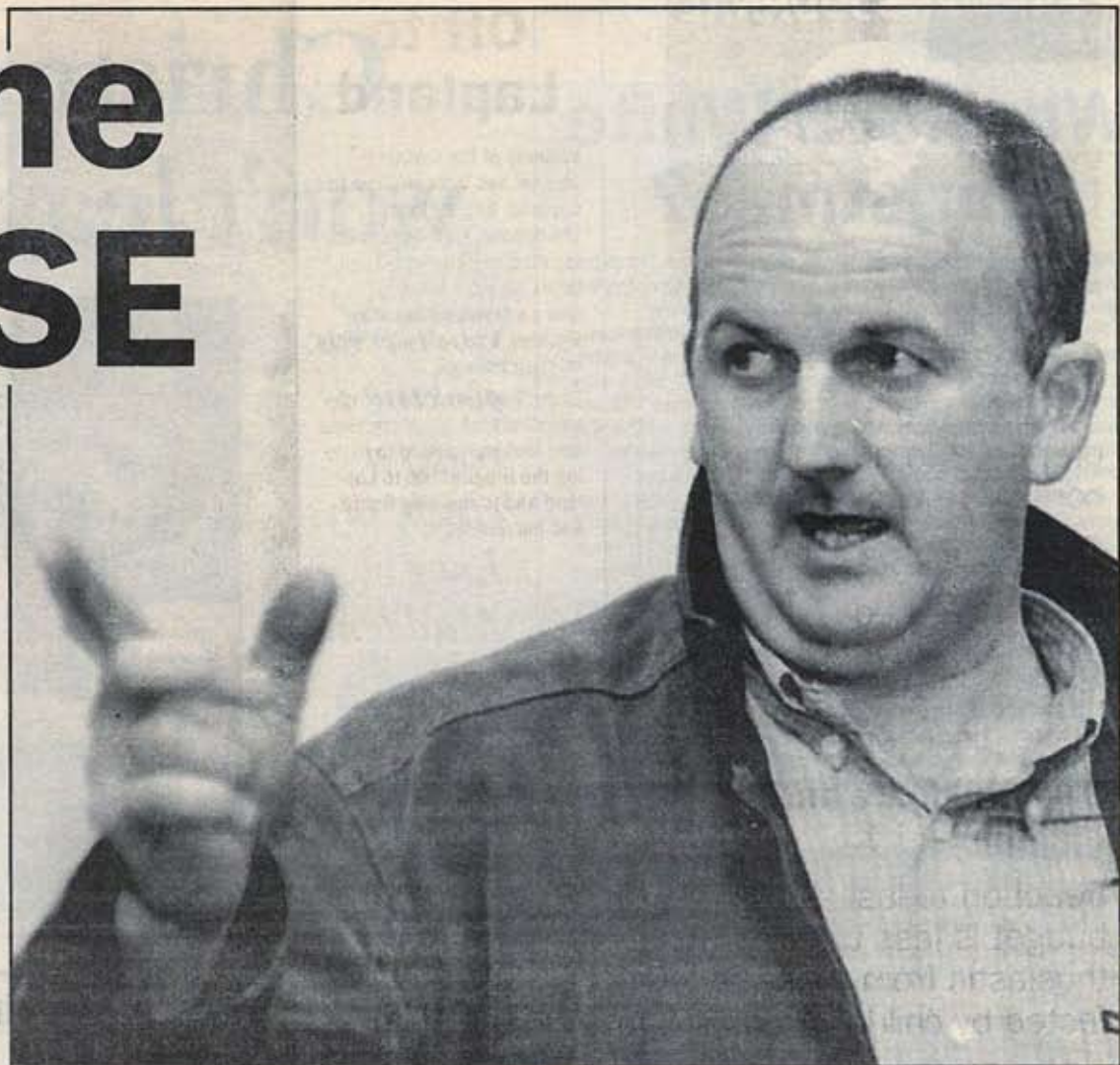


Lifting the veil of BSE secrecy

A special meeting in Tullamore earlier this week, to establish a support group for farmers affected by BSE, attracted 140 people with a steely determination to assert their rights at long last. **Barbara Jordan and Mairead Lavery report.**

► John Brew, Kilkee Co Clare: 'We've had no milk cheque since early September and we have to carry that loss ourselves. That's not right.'



THE TULLAMORE meeting will go down as a turning point when the history of this disease is eventually written.

At first it seemed that people would not share their experience. There was a terrible silence at the outset of the meeting but after the first speaker told his harrowing account of ill treatment by the Department of Agriculture, all the other stories came tumbling out.

Ordinary men and women involved in farming rose to their feet and gave deeply personal accounts of how BSE had affected their lives and their livelihoods. The effect was cathartic. The meeting started at 2.30 pm; it was almost impossible to bring it to an end at 5.15 pm.

While everyone's account was different and individual, there were some common themes. Everyone related to the unspeakable treatment meted out by officials from the Department of Agriculture, who became involved in every BSE case once the vet had established the professional opinion that an animal was afflicted. Many speakers described how they were warned by the Department not to discuss their positive BSE test with friends and neighbours, yet they said it is virtually impossible to hide the fact of BSE once it is formally diagnosed.

Milk is no longer collected and usually dumped on the land. Similarly, within weeks of diagnosis, the entire herd is removed and slaughtered, leaving behind a farm without animals and a deathly silence. Time and time again those assembled referred to the terrible stigma attached to having a BSE depopulation. Farmers are treated as if they had deliberately caused the disease, either by poor husbandry or criminal intent. The fraud squad are automatically involved in every single case.

Quite a number of people described how they were questioned by Gardai. One man said he was arrested with his son who was having chemotherapy treatment for cancer. His son was vomiting throughout the interrogation in the Garda Station.

Another common theme related to the haggling over compensation with Department officials who, it seems, in many cases, offered totally insulting amounts for the affected herd. Many speakers felt they were blackmailed into accepting very flawed valuations of their animals. Valuers from the Department of Agriculture were roundly criticised for their comments and their behaviour while dealing with the farmers affected. A handful of people who

managed to argue for and get independent evaluation of their loss fared much better than those who settled with the Department officials.

John and Mary Breen, who convened the meeting in association with *Journal 2*, were congratulated by numerous speakers. The view was that by going public, the Breens had helped to break the silence surrounding BSE and offered hope to those now going through depopulations.

Questions were also asked of the Department of Agriculture in relation to enforcement of the rules regarding the use of meat and bone-meal in animal feeds. If the ban was properly enforced, then why are we seeing an increase in cases? The feeling was that the Department had failed to police the millers. Most of the farmers who attended the meeting in Tullamore have complete feed records; they want to know how BSE came onto their farms, but the Department showed no interest in this line of

inquiry. The IFA and other farming organisations were also criticised. Speakers described how they approached local representatives for help and advice but were abandoned in their hour of need. Heated exchanges between farmers and IFA officials who attended the meeting were greeted with applause. There was majority support for the view that the IFA had washed its hands of farmers experiencing BSE.

The BSE support group is now firmly established with plans to devise a strategy to assist farmers who are currently experiencing BSE depopulation. The group will also address the compensation issue for those who have not been given their full entitlements.

Over the coming weeks we will publish some of the personal accounts and experiences heard at the meeting, as well as keeping readers informed about progress of the support group.

Views from the floor

PADDY KENNEDY, a dairy farmer from Mohill, Co Leitrim, believes he was the first farmer in the county to suffer a depopulation because of BSE. He said: "It's two years ago now and to be honest I don't think the Department here knew what to do at all. They took samples of meal on the day but that was a waste of time. It's essential that the whole issue of meat and bonemeal is followed up and I think there has been a hold-back by the department with the millers."

"I believe there should be a complete ban on the feeding of meat and bonemeal to all animals. As long as that's around the place there will always be a suspicion that a farmer had access to it. I was very impressed with the meeting today and hearing the stories of different farmers gave me strength. It's all been dreadful. We knew it wasn't our own fault but it was something you just couldn't talk about."

JOHN BREW, Kilkee Co Clare, is in the process of restocking after one of his cows was diagnosed with BSE in the early autumn. A dairy and beef farmer, he succeeded in getting 42 per cent extra compensation for his entire herd above the original Department offer.

He said: "We had a large herd which we spent a lifetime building up and we never had an outbreak of TB, brucellosis, salmonella or anything else for that matter. The Department valuation of those animals was nowhere near what they were worth. Clare Marts valued them at close on 32 per cent higher. I still wasn't happy so it was sent to arbitration and we eventually agreed on 32 per cent. Then I looked for my VAT, as the valuation is not inclusive of it, and that brought the figure up to 42 per cent."

John insisted he would get paid before any animal left the yard, and he nearly achieved that aim. "From the time the sample is taken, you have two weeks to get your tax clearance cert, and everything in order. The animals left here on a Sunday were slaughtered on a Monday and I had my money by Wednesday. We've had no milk cheque since early September and we have to carry that loss ourselves. That's not right."



Denis Ryder, Dunmore, Co Galway, addressing the BSE support group meeting in Tullamore on Monday.