

## LETTERS

### Rabies policy: what price animal welfare?

Sir, Presumably few people would doubt that, in addition to the financial costs and the emotional distress to their owners, there is generally an adverse effect on the welfare of pet animals cooped up in quarantine for six months or more.

However, many in Britain apparently regard this as an acceptable price to pay for freedom from animal rabies; and some would say that the value of pet animal welfare is unquantifiable anyway. However, it is far from certain that, over the last quarter of a century, quarantine *per se* conferred on Britain any real protection from rabies. Contrary to popular belief, there has been no independent authoritative risk assessment study to establish the facts. On the other hand, there is a growing appreciation of the economic dimension of animal welfare and of the potential of contingent valuation for measuring it.

I have advocated elsewhere (Done 1996) the pressing need for proper rabies risk assessment and for a full economic audit of the various options for dealing with the perceived risks. As the authors of the 1992 Royal Society Report on risk analysis and management have emphasized, much progress has been made in this area since the previous Report nine years earlier. And, as the recent paper by Bennett (1996) implies, animal welfare is perhaps not so much economically unquantifiable as unquantified for want of trying. Market research using contingent valuation – asking individuals how much they would be willing to pay to ensure a particular improvement – might appropriately, and profitably, address questions like:

‘How would pet owners value reduction of quarantine length from six months to six weeks, to six days, or less?’ or

‘What would be regarded as an acceptable net price (via full economic audit) for a twofold, or tenfold, or hundredfold rise in smuggling of pet animals to avoid quarantine?’

Such questions are unlikely to yield mathematically precise answers for immediate insertion into a magical decision-support formula. And the answers derived would obviously vary over time, as people became better educated about the facts and as their ability to handle the concepts improved. Yet, even in the short-term, they could well give us a much better idea of the relative orders of economic magnitude of the potential costs and benefits, than any amount of the sort of adversarial debate in which we have traditionally indulged.

The Government currently spends some £750,000 annually on propaganda asserting the absolute necessity for six months quarantine (Hansard 1995). It is difficult to see why at least a proportion of one year’s spend, could not more profitably be diverted to research on risk assessment and animal welfare economics in relation to rabies policy.

*J T Done*

*Honorary Research Fellow, Agricultural Economics Unit, University of Exeter*

### References

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