



HISTORY & POLICY

Connecting historians, policymakers and the media

History & Policy case study

Foot and Mouth Disease

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In 2001, I was based at the University of Manchester, in the second year of a Wellcome Trust-funded PhD on the history of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) when the disease appeared in Britain for only the second time in 33 years. Slaughter had been the UK's official control policy for nearly a century, the government championing it as the most effective solution to the disease. In the late 1980s, the UK was instrumental in establishing slaughter as an EC-wide FMD control policy by engineering a ban on vaccination, which had been used across the continent.

Early in the epidemic, I approached *The Guardian* newspaper, offering to write an article on the history of the disease. In [Kill or Cure?](#), I used my historical research to show that slaughter was not an automatically 'correct' response but a negotiated solution involving political, economic, social and many other factors as well as science.

My article contributed to a growing critique of the slaughter policy, and attracted considerable media attention. I was then invited to submit historical evidence in support of Peter Kindersley's judicial challenge to the slaughter policy. I argued that:

- The technical and administrative difficulties with vaccination could have been effectively tackled if the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) had desired it
- MAFF had never wanted to vaccinate and the problems it cited merely justified its existing stance and hid deeper anti-vaccination sentiments behind scientific reasoning
- Exposing the real reasoning behind the rejection of vaccination was necessary to mount any substantial challenge to the slaughter policy

On my own initiative, I also submitted evidence to the government-appointed Royal Society inquiry into infectious diseases of livestock. But I was never asked to expand on my claims and I have no reason to believe that I influenced policy or the relationship between history and policy. It was interesting that after the 2001 outbreak, the official history of FMD, which proclaimed slaughter as an authoritative and repeatedly effective policy, was revised. Professor Iain Anderson's government-commissioned report opened

with the phrase 'we seem condemned to repeat the mistakes of history.' It noted that control by slaughter had often failed to eliminate FMD quickly and that the policy inflicted tremendous hardship on farmers.

The events of 2001 forced the government to concede that vaccination against FMD could be required in future outbreaks and to incorporate it in contingency control plans. However, this did not amount to a major change in policy; indeed similar conclusions had been reached after the 1967-8 epidemic. The 2002 Animal Health Act actually strengthened its power to slaughter, and this method was again applied during the recent, smaller outbreak of FMD in 2007. When the Institute of Animal Health laboratory at Pirbright in Surrey emerged as the likely source of this outbreak, I again wrote for [The Guardian](#) to give a historical perspective to the debate about vaccination research.

Despite intense media interest in the history of FMD during the 2001 epidemic, policymakers seemed totally switched off to the potential value of taking a historical perspective and nothing really came of my involvement in the FMD debate. My student status probably didn't help, though this was counterbalanced by my veterinary qualifications. I think it would have helped to know which policymakers to target and been able to develop some personal relationships. But my experiences were certainly worthwhile - I am firmly convinced of the importance of presenting these perspectives to policymakers and of arguing for the relevance of history to the present.

In 2005 I was involved in the Foresight project into [The Detection and Identification of Infectious Diseases](#), managed by the Office of Science and Technology. This involved attending a two-day workshop with other contributors, mostly scientists, and writing a 10,000-word historical review of the trends in the detection, monitoring and investigation of infectious human and animal diseases in Britain and sub-Saharan Africa in the 20th century. I am not aware of any policy developments that resulted from my historical review, though there was coverage of the project on [BBC Online](#). I was able to get involved thanks to considerable institutional support, including one month's leave from my research project to write my report.

My current research project on the history of farm health planning (the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) strategy for rolling out veterinary preventive medicine on farms) promises improved prospects for policy engagement. It is funded by [The Rural Environment and Land Use Programme](#) (RELU), which encourages policy-relevant research and promotes contacts between researchers and policymakers. I anticipate undertaking some work shadowing at DEFRA, and hopefully this will provide the necessary personal connections. But it is worth noting that to my knowledge, I am the only historian to have received a RELU grant; most of its funding is allocated to interdisciplinary collaborative projects involving scientists and social scientists.

Lessons for connecting history and policy:

- Media coverage can raise the profile of history in the policy debate and open up new avenues for historians' involvement
- If policymakers find the historical message unpalatable for political reasons, historians may struggle to have any impact on policy outcomes
- Personal connections are needed between historians and policymakers
- Historians may need institutional support to commit time to policy-related initiatives

See also:

Evidence to support Peter Kindersley's judicial challenge to the slaughter policy, now available on the Parliament website as [research paper 01/35](#), *Foot and Mouth Disease*

[The Wellcome Trust's](#) case study of Abigail Woods' involvement in the slaughter debate during the 2001 FMD epidemic

Virginia Berridge's analysis of Abigail Woods' involvement in the 2001 FMD crisis, 'Public or Policy Understanding of History?' in *Social History of Medicine*, vol.16 no. 3, 2003