

Could 19th-century vets provide lessons for farm animal health policy today?

June 14 2013

When Foot and Mouth Disease broke out in 2001, while consumers may have been shocked to see pyres of burning cattle on their television screens, few were surprised that the UK Government had intervened in the crisis. Nowadays we assume farm animal health is a legitimate area of interest for the state. But 150 years ago the veterinary profession had to develop new areas of understanding and practice to enable this to happen, and a leading academic in the history of human and animal health argues that this could give us some pointers for how we approach such issues today.

Dr Abigail Woods, Reader in the History of Human and [Animal Health](#) at Imperial College and Visiting Fellow at Newcastle's Centre for Rural Economy, will be discussing the origins of UK Government veterinary expertise in a public lecture in the Clement Stephenson Lecture Theatre, Agriculture Building, Newcastle University at 1 pm on Monday 24 June.

Clement Stephenson is a name little-known now, except by students attending lectures in the theatre that bears his name. They may be unaware of the important role he played, not only in the foundation of agricultural studies in Newcastle, but in establishing the state veterinary service in the north east. In 1865 he was appointed Veterinary Inspector for the Newcastle Corporation, with the task of stamping out Cattle Plagues, and from 1877 he also took on the role of Chief Veterinary Inspector for Northumberland.

He and his colleagues across the country had to find the means to apply

at local level the directives of an increasingly interventionist Government, as more and more farm animal diseases were "scheduled", meaning that infected stock had to be reported to the authorities. These veterinarians were pioneers in a relatively new profession and had to develop their own expertise controlling these diseases on behalf of the state.

Dr Woods explained: "During the second half of the nineteenth century vets were not learning how to deal with disease from books, they were learning by doing. They were quite hostile to the idea of laboratory experiments and theory, instead embracing policies underpinned by field-based learning and personal experience.

"We tend to take a much more theoretical approach to learning today, but there may be some lessons we could take from these pioneers. They showed that expertise can only be gained by addressing problems, and cannot be acquired purely, or even mainly, via a theoretical approach.

"During serious outbreaks of disease in more recent times we have seen that the professionals involved do indeed develop their expertise over the course of the epidemic, and advances in practice happen much more rapidly during crises. Perhaps we should regard these as legitimate forms of learning, rather than expecting experts to have all the answers before they develop and implement policies."

More information: [www.ncl.ac.uk/cre/publish/Press%20Releases/Could%2019th%20century%20vets%20provide%20lessons%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cre/publish/Press%20Releases/Could%2019th%20century%20vets%20provide%20lessons%20(2).pdf)

Provided by Newcastle University

Citation: Could 19th-century vets provide lessons for farm animal health policy today? (2013, June 14) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2013-06-19th-century-vets-lessons-farm-animal.html>

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