

Could this happen Here?

Horsemeat scandal blamed on European meat regulation changes

Food expert says redefinition of meat meant manufacturers had to look overseas for cheap replacements



Unprocessed, natural meat at Smithfields meat market in London. Photograph by David Levene Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

The UK's [horsemeat scandal](#) was in "large part" the result of a switch from UK to foreign meat suppliers in 2012 caused by an abrupt change in European regulation that the government failed to contest, according to the expert who led the [Food Standards Agency's \(FSA\)](#) surveillance programme for a decade.

The [change meant that "desinewed meat" \(DSM\)](#), a fine mince rubbed under pressure from carcasses, could no longer be called meat on packaging. DSM produced in the UK was the main ingredient in most value-range burgers, sausages, pies and kebabs

and the change meant that thousands of tonnes of meat had to be sourced from elsewhere and at low cost.

"You would think it would set alarm bells ringing but it did not," said Dr Mark Woolfe, head of food authenticity at the FSA until 2009. "There was an obvious risk. The companies were seeking a low price and that is asking for trouble."

"In principle there should not be anything wrong with a company going abroad for meat, as the EU has the same rules," said Woolfe. "But in practice, the longer and more complex the supply chain, the more difficult it is to control. That is a lesson we have learned the hard way."

Woolfe said the food industry got only a couple of days of notice of the change. "It was very badly done," he said. "The government did not [fight the decision](#) of the European commission (EC), they accepted it, which I thought was a great shame. Food retailers also seemed to be very unconcerned about the change. Everybody bowed down to the EC decision."

A spokesman for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said: "Not complying with the changes to de-sinewed meat rules would have risked a devastating ban on UK meat exports and we worked hard to minimise the impact on the food industry. It's wrong to say this prompted the subsequent contamination of meat products, but in any case there's absolutely no excuse for any food to be knowingly mislabelled."

Michael Walker, a founder board member of the FSA and now at the privatised Laboratory of the Government Chemist, defended the EC decision: "We need to be honest about what is going into food and that is what the EC was trying to do."

But he accused the government of complacency before the [horsemeat scandal](#) erupted. "We should not let this fade away without taking steps to prevent us being on the back foot again," he said. Walker said testing had discovered horse and donkey contamination in food in 2003, but that after the outcry died down, it was assumed the problem had gone away and that absence of evidence was used to infer the absence of any problems. "This

should not happen again. The UK government used to be the world leader in food authenticity."

Woolfe also criticised policies that saw the [FSA losing its responsibility](#) for food enforcement, which was delegated to 330 local authorities. "It is unfortunate that the UK more or less ran down their surveillance," he said. "The FSA then had to rely on information from other European countries and from local authorities."

Previously, he said, a lot of FSA testing surveys were prioritised on the basis of industry intelligence that came from a committee that has since been disbanded. He added that local authority food enforcement services were substandard and poorly funded "Cinderella operations".

Woolfe said that DSM had been developed to replace "mechanically recovered meat" (MRM), a "toothpaste" like product with no muscle fibre structure, after the latter was banned from being described as meat on packaging. But EC inspectors, who visited the UK in March 2012, then [decided that DSM also failed to adequately meet](#) the description of meat. The two main UK companies both subsequently abandoned production of beef and lamb DSM, Woolfe said.

"Until the change, most [meat in low-priced products] would have come from the UK, and was therefore much easier to control," he said. "The change has probably contributed in large part [the horsemeat scandal]. Food companies squeeze the supplier. They weren't prepared to give the suppliers more money, so it forced the suppliers to find cheap new sources."

Dr Chris Smart, a food expert from Leatherhead Food Research, said: "It is a shame that testing by the FSA has been reduced. I am sure there will be other crises that come along in the next few years."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/feb/12/horsemeat-scandal-european-regulation-changes>

Horsemeat does carry a health risk, but it's incredibly small

Even for people whose diet is mainly convenience meals, the real threat comes from high levels of fat and salt

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Robin McKie science editor

The Observer, Saturday 9 February 2013 17.34 GMT

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Horsemeat in a ready meal could contain a potentially dangerous chemical called bute – but the amount is 'about a millionth' of the dose given as medication.

Photograph: Chris Helgren/Reuters

The discovery that horsemeat has been used in a variety of processed foods, including burgers, lasagne and other convenience meals, is disquieting. However, the presence of horseflesh in such meals does not directly pose a threat to health. Horsemeat is still eaten by people in many European countries. Italy is a major consumer, for example.

But questions remain about its consumption in the UK because of the danger that it might contain a chemical known as bute or, to give its full name, phenylbutazone, a drug that is given to horses to relieve pain and treat fevers.

The problem is that bute can have side effects in human beings. It was once given to men and women to tackle conditions such as gout and arthritis until it was discovered that in some cases the chemical can trigger a serious blood disorder known as aplastic anaemia. Those who become affected by the condition suffer from loss of red and white blood cells and, without prompt treatment, it is considered to be life-threatening. As a result, phenylbutazone was banned as a medication for humans by drug authorities on both sides of the Atlantic several decades ago.

The problem is that bute may have made its way into the horsemeat that has been used to make burgers and lasagne, raising the fear that the chemical could trigger cases of aplastic anaemia in those who unwittingly consume contaminated foods, a point acknowledged by Chris Elliott, professor of [food](#) safety and microbiology at Queen's University Belfast.

"Obviously, bute is a chemical to be concerned about," he told the *Observer*. "The issue is: will the traces that we are likely to find in contaminated meals pose a threat to those to consume them?"

"In fact, the amount of bute that is likely to be obtained from eating a horsemeat burger is going to be about a millionth of that acquired when a person is given a dose of bute when used as an anti-gout medication. In other words, the risk of getting aplastic anaemia that is posed by consuming a horsemeat burger is very low indeed."

However, many people live on diets that are dominated by processed foods, and bute could accumulate in their bodies. In such cases, horsemeat could pose a risk to health. Elliot again stressed the need for caution.

"To be blunt, if your diet is made up mainly of processed foods like those that have been found to contain horsemeat, the real threat to your health will not come from phenylbutazone but from the high levels of salt and fat you get in these products.

"You will be consuming dangerous high levels of both additives and that is likely to put a person at serious risk of cardiac disease and other conditions. So the real danger comes from the processing, not so much the [meat](#) that you find in the products."

Horsemeat scandal exposes the cheap food imperative

This ever-widening story cuts to the heart of how messed up our eating and shopping habits have become



John Harris

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'The only thing that a lot of people can either cut back or keep to a minimum is food spending.' Photograph: Remy Gabalda/AFP/Getty Images

What do we know of the arcane processes and multinational supply chains that lie behind the modern food industry? Or rather, how much do we *want* to know? Some food lines – bread, high-end confectionery, wine – obscure the realities of mass production behind a hazy myth of traditional techniques, careful quality control, men in chef's hats and the like. But in the case of the meat industry, everything is unspoken. For most people, there will probably be some half-formed idea of the trade's realities that occasionally comes to mind: giant slaughterhouses, the questionable body parts that go into mince, the tangle of horrors forever embodied in that dread term "[Turkey Twizzlers](#)". But it is largely all held at bay – part, perhaps, of that gentle denial whereby, once you're beyond mere birds and fish, the English language tends to use different words for animals, and their edible flesh.

Well, now we know. Of all the coverage of the ongoing horse meat scandal, my favourite so far is in the Financial Times ([paywall link](#)), written beautifully straight, and therefore all the more powerful. From the top, then: "The Findus products revealed to contain horsemeat ... came from a Comigel factory in Luxembourg. Comigel in turn was supplied with meat from a company in southwestern France called

Spanghero, whose parent [company] is called Poujol." Benoît Hamon, France's consumer affairs minister, said "that Poujol 'acquired the frozen meat from a Cypriot trader, which had sub-contracted the order to a trader in the Netherlands. The latter was supplied from an abattoir and butcher located in Romania."

Let us briefly pause to marvel at what all this means. Of course, contrary to the widespread impression that millions of British carnivores have come close to being slowly poisoned, eating horse has probably done no one any harm. The weekend's talk about the [veterinary drug bute](#) look distinctly like an ex post facto attempt to somehow make all the fuss look rational, and – I speak here as a vegetarian – the horsemeat imbroglio has revealed the astounding power of preferences that are cultural, rather than rational. But at the same time, this ever-widening story cuts straight to the heart of how messed up our eating and shopping habits have become, and what a completely screwed-up economy is doing to the most basic aspects of how we live.

Ours is an economy in which ludicrously cheap food is an absolute necessity, and not just for the people on benefits and limited incomes whose caricatured presence has been there in just about everything written about the current scandal. At the risk of stating the blindingly obvious, wages continue to stagnate, bills carry on rising and the only thing that a lot of people can either cut back or keep to a minimum is food spending. On this score, I think of the [family I recently met in Hartlepool](#), threatened by the so-called spare bedroom tax, and what a woman called Lorna Holden told me about its likely effects: "We can't cut it from fuel, or electricity, or petrol.

So when you lay that budget out over a month, with your council tax and water, and all your bills, there's nowhere else it can come from: the only place we can cut from is our food budget. And we're already having the cheapest food you can buy."

They are hardly alone: the cheap food imperative extends along a long social continuum, and reaches most of us. Last week, the market research company Mintel released figures suggesting that [89% of Britons now shop on a budget](#) – and, moreover, that "some 30% of consumers buy budget ranges compared to just one in five (20%) back in 2008".

The report went on, "over half (53%) agree low price is more important than brand name and nearly seven in 10 (68%) are proud to tell their friends about any good bargains they find". Prior to the horse scandal, that presumably translated as lots of people loudly extolling the wonders of Tesco Everyday Value "beef" burgers, eight of which were retailing for £1. And contrary to what [some people might have recently told us](#), this is not because they are so stupid that they barely know how to hold a knife and fork, nor any more ignorant about the food industry than millions of other people, but because some of us – most, in some way – increasingly have no option.

In other words, though the supermarkets squeeze producers and hold out the illusion of cheap food as a means of extending their dominance, much of this is a simple matter of market demand. And note what is actually happening within food markets. The year 2013 began with [the boss of Waitrose](#) warning that, partly because 2012 was so wet, the price of bread and vegetables was likely to go up by around 5%, if not more.

Meanwhile, bigger forces such as climate change and population growth make ever-rising food prices a certainty. And all this as a seemingly unending downturn means that anything better and healthier than the current state of affairs simply unaffordable. So, food producers are desperately trying hold back the inevitable, with very strange results: among them, the sourcing of supplies in far-flung corners of eastern Europe, where the food trade may be in the hands of crime syndicates, and the few people who well know that something grim is afoot have to keep quiet.

Since 2009, budgets for public-sector trading standards and environmental health have been cut by 32% in real terms. The trade union Unison reckons that over the last two decades, [the meat inspection staff of the Food Standards Agency has been halved](#) – and environmental health last year saw "a 15% reduction in enforcement notices issued; a 4% reduction in enforcement visits; and an 8% reduction in scheduled inspections". Meanwhile, cheap meat pours into the UK from all over the world, and the current fuss about horses should probably be the least of anyone's worries: how long, you can only wonder, before some genuine public health emergency emerges from this mess of complexity, cost-cutting, and what was once known

as light-touch regulation?

Still, you may be reassured to know that EU regulations insist that if it's called "meat", it has to be "skeletal muscle with naturally included or adherent fat and connective tissue", and that our own Food Standards Agency insists that "economy" beefburgers must contain a heartening 47% of the same stuff, sourced from cows. As ever, modern capitalism spoils us, eh?

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