

Disease in animals, suicide in humans

British farmers are more than twice as likely to consider suicide as people in other occupations, and the recent foot-and-mouth crisis may be partly to blame. Researchers at the University of Wales College of Medicine surveyed 425 farmers from 3 counties and compared their responses with those of nonfarmers. Ten percent of the farmers said they were suffering financial problems, and although only 6% admitted to having poor mental health — a figure lower than the national average — 3% said they thought life was not worth living and 1% had thought about killing themselves. (The researchers noted that farmers have easier access to different means of killing themselves, such as guns and poisons.) The average respondent was a 51-year-old male who had farmed for at least 16 years.

In June 2001, an investigation into the suicides of 3 Welsh farmers found that the men's deaths had been triggered by livestock disease: foot and mouth in 2 cases, and bovine spongiform encephalopathy in the other. One farmer's livestock had been declared free of disease and given clearance to be moved when a government notice prohibited the animals from leaving the farm. In another case, a farmer hung himself after a friend took away his gun when he threatened to shoot himself. Coroner John Hollis said disease had been a catastrophe for the 3 families, and urged farming organizations to provide more support for farm families.

Janet Gatward of the Rural Stress Information Network said that at the height of the foot-and-mouth outbreak the charity was receiving over 1000 calls per month from distressed farmers and their relatives. Although that epidemic is officially over, its after-effects are still being felt. The group now receives 20 to 30 calls per month, compared with 2 or 3 per month prior to the crisis.

Gatward noted that the problems facing many rural families, such as isolation and money woes, were already evident when the foot-and-mouth crisis erupted. — *Mary Helen Spooner*, West Sussex, UK

Gates give \$500 million

A foundation funded by Microsoft Chair Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda, donated more than US\$500 million as part of its global health program last year. The foundation, which has a US\$24-billion endowment, also grants money in 3 other "program areas" — education, libraries and the Pacific northwest (where they live). Support for education alone totalled another US\$413 million in 2002. The health funding included donations of US\$200 million to the National Institutes of Health to support elimination of disease in the developing world. The global health program focuses on levelling the playing field between the world's haves and have-nots. The foundation notes that only 10% of health research spending is directed at diseases that cause 90% of the global health burden. "Our grant making is grounded in the belief that the death of a child in Africa is no less tragic than the death of a child in America," the Gates state. — *CMAJ*