

The Coffee Brothers

Good communication is just as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the sea*, 1955

Rabbit haemorrhagic disease was first officially recognised in Europe when a new disease of domestic rabbits was demonstrated to be spreading rapidly through Italy in 1988. Although it clearly differed from other common rabbit diseases, it was initially called ‘malattia X’ or ‘disease X’ because there was considerable uncertainty about its cause. A plethora of possibilities and opinions confronted those trying to understand this mysterious malady and it took some time to sort things out.

Although rabbit meat was widely produced in Italy for the domestic market, rising demand had seen a shortfall in supply. This had been made up by importing both live rabbits and rabbit meat. These products came mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, but also on a smaller scale from the People’s Republic of China. Wherever virulent RHDV originated, be it in China, or in East Germany as the Chinese insisted (Liu *et al.* 1984), Italy seems to have been an inevitable early recipient and was the first of many European countries where the disease was eventually encountered.

It was not until several years later that Dr Norbert Nowotny and colleagues suggested that virus samples from Italy were genetically most similar to those from Eastern and Central Europe while the viruses subsequently collected in Spain and parts of France had greater affinity with those from China, Korea and Mexico (Nowotny *et al.* 1999). The rapid confirmation of the disease in the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary soon after its appearance in Italy also heightened the possibility that Eastern Europe was a possible transit route, if not a source of the disease.

The best evidence available only confirms that the disease was present in the Ukraine and eastern Slovakia in 1987 (Rodak *et al.* 1991) and that it spread westwards across the Czech Republic in a little more than 12 months. It spread into Silesia and the Krakow regions of Poland in 1988 (Górski *et al.* 1994), resulting in the deaths of over 27 000 domestic rabbits. Whether that spread had emanated from the Ukraine is still unclear and, given the discontent and social turmoil within the Soviet Union at that time, we may never know. Moves towards more open government through the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* were certainly underway at the time but were suddenly reduced to minor importance in April 1986, when the catastrophic Chernobyl nuclear reactor meltdown completely dominated world news. With high-level attempts being made to cover up a nuclear reactor disaster, the simultaneous spread of a new disease among domestic rabbits would hardly have raised an official eyebrow.

Even so, the unfolding of events in Chernobyl did inevitably colour the emergence of the new disease. In Italy, over 300 rabbit farms recorded major losses to malattia X just as radioactive smoke from the burning nuclear reactor began to tint western European skies. As