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Too much evidence, too little policy?
Competing knowledge claims and Bovine TB control

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Introduction

• Decade after Modernising Government
• TB as a case study of EBPM
• Structure of the paper
  – Theory of EBPM
  – Bovine TB story since 1997
  – EBPM reconsidered
Evidence-Based Policy-Making

• Modernising Government white paper
• Central tenets:
  – Policies shaped by evidence
  – Measured by results not activity
  – Flexible and innovative
  – More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things
• Influenced by BSE experience
Defra’s Use of Science

• 2800 scientists and vets in Defra
• 7000 more in Defra’s agencies and NDPBs
• Raft of policy documents
  – Science Meets Policy (2005)
  – Etc
Benefits of EBPM

• Basis in evidence-based medicine: “diagnosis” of problems
• Depoliticises decision-making
  – Policy placed beyond political debate
  – Political decisions reframed as technical/scientific questions
  – Blame shifting
• Certainty in policy-making
BTB prior to 1997

• Growing incidence of disease + increasing government spending = pressure to do something
• Highly contested link between badgers and TB
• No rigorous scientific proof
• Commissioning of Sir John Krebs report
Krebs and the RBCT

- Recommended systematic scientific experiment
- Randomised Badger Culling Trials (RBCT)
- Independent Scientific Group (ISG)
- Compared effectiveness of proactive culling, reactive culling and no culling
- Some modifications made to encourage public support
- Nevertheless, portrayed as objective science
Public consultation dispute

• Initial conclusions of the RBCT: perturbation effect means culling can increased TB spread
• Defra announces consultation on culling
• Dispute between Defra and ISG over representation of scientific advice
• 47,000 responses, 95.6% opposed to badger culling
Veterinary expertise

- Final ISG report confirms initial findings
- Creation of Tuberculosis Advisory Group (TBAG), veterinarian-led
- Succeeded by Tuberculosis *Eradication* Group (TBEG)
- Vets (through BVA) consistently in favour of culling
- Emphasis on “practical wisdom”
Challenging the ISG

- Asked to report on ISG science; published in same week as ISG final report
- King questioned ISG findings and advocated badger culling
- ISG criticised King for “superficial” and “very selective” report
- Implication that Defra deliberately tried to undermine ISG
Why more evidence?

- ISG scientific evidence has, to an extent, silenced critics (especially NFU)
- However, doesn’t lead to any obvious, workable policy options
- Cattle based measures not working well, vaccine still being developed
Depoliticisation, Repoliticisation

- Depoliticisation not possible in the case of BTB
- Increasingly fragmented and contested evidence base gives power to Defra’s critics, but no firm justification for policy
- ‘Repoliticisation’ is necessary: taking a difficult decision that possibly ignores the evidence
- Welsh example increases demands for action
Conclusion

- Following decades of inaction, the RBCT seemed to offer the magic bullet Defra wanted.
- But lack of obvious policy options meant that hoped-for depoliticisation was not possible.
- Re-opening of the evidence base, but high public spending and profile of scientists means scrutiny of ministers remains.
- Evidence can inform decision-making, but can’t eliminate decisions themselves!
References

