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TITLE: May contain traces of mad cow

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The Government wants to allow meat from countries with Mad Cow disease into Australia. And our loose labelling rules mean you won't know the difference, writes Hilary Bambrick

Nothing's more Australian than the good old sausage sandwich, sizzled to perfection by Saturday fundraisers outside the hardware store, appeasing the kids while mum or dad picks up the bits and bobs for the latest home reno.

Or so you might have thought.

From the middle of next year, Australia has said that it will lift its import restrictions on beef and [slurry](#) (because that's what really goes into sausages, let's be clear) from countries that have reported cases of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, aka mad cow disease).

We've been [guaranteed by Trade Minister Simon Crean](#) that Australia would only be importing products that are BSE-free. But how can he tell? Is he trying to say that the countries we will import from can adequately tell the difference, and can ensure that any BSE-tainted meat is only consumed by their own nationals?

In fact, soon you won't be able to tell if the meat you're eating comes with a dash of "low risk" of degenerative brain disease (ie imported from a BSE-affected country) or "no risk" (ie Australian), because anything that has undergone some form of manufacture in Australia can still be labelled as "Made in Australia". Stuff it in a sausage skin, add a bit of salt and pepper and it's suddenly as Aussie as 'roo meat'.

Not wishing to quibble with the statistics that say the risk of contracting variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (the human form of BSE) is "[very small](#)" my real concern is the fact that consumers are being duped. Surely they should be able to choose whether this is a risk they're willing to take? When the stakes are so high, I'm sure most would take "no risk" over "low risk" any day.

The decision to lift import restrictions has been made for trade reasons, with a view that the market will rule. But if the market is to decide whether such imports are acceptable, then the market — that is, consumers — need to be fairly and fully informed. Australia's

food labelling regulations are sorely lacking and it has been announced that they are to undergo a [long-overdue review](#). Identifying the origins of ingredients should be top of the list.

Food labelling in Australia has long bowed to industry pressure to keep consumers in the dark, or at least somewhat confused and occasionally misled. On the surface, labelling looks pretty good. We have tables filled with "Nutrition Information", but if you were actually to measure out how big a "serve" is and stick to that, chances are you'd end up rather hungry. Industry has fiercely rejected the proposed introduction of a simple "traffic light system" (green = healthy, everyday kind of food; amber = not so good; red = run for your life) which has been shown to [help guide consumers towards healthier choices](#) in processed foods because it would steer consumers away from the most profitable, energy dense but otherwise nutritionally poor foods.

While we have regulations that generally prevent direct health claims being made on the packaging, a quick browse through the breakfast cereals soon shows that implied claims can be so strong that this barely matters. Some of these cereals aimed at children were recently shown to contain [far too much sugar and salt](#). And don't get me started on so-called "energy" drinks, three-quarters of which were recently found to contain levels of caffeine [so extreme as to be illegal](#).

One of the best strategies for consumers to ensure that what they are actually getting resembles what they think they are getting is of course to choose the simplest, least processed types of foods, like fresh fruit and vegetables. An apple really is still an apple, and doesn't require a lot of labelling.

Properly identifying the origins and manufacturing pathways of ingredients in manufactured foods is complex — there's really no such thing as a "food chain" anymore, it's more of a "food web". Ingredients and additives in the food on the supermarket shelves come from all over the world, and are often not in any form that's close to their original identity. [Michael Pollan](#) for example, reveals that corn is a key ingredient in just about any manufactured product but you won't be able to tell that from reading the label.

In the event of a contamination scare or a disease outbreak, it can be extremely difficult to identify which one of numerous components — in maybe hundreds, if not thousands, of manufactured foods — is to blame. Requiring food manufacturers both to know and to identify clearly where ingredients come from will no doubt cause a headache for some manufacturers, but doing so facilitates traceability when something goes wrong. It enables a rapid and targeted public health response.

Senators Bill Heffernan and Nick Xenophon are [pushing for a Senate inquiry](#) into the Government decision to introduce beef imports from affected countries. While much of their support will come from the local agricultural industry worried about the impacts on the sale of Australian beef, the real focus should be on public health. One reason for that is that despite overseas testing showing a decline in the number of BSE affected cattle, the testing regimes are inadequate and in many countries the poor farming practices that created BSE — like feeding sheep to cows — still prevail.

There is still so much that is not known about BSE, including the incubation period; the time between eating that hamburger and becoming ill with vCJD. It could be decades. It may be that we haven't yet seen the full extent of the epidemic, and we don't know how people's "carrier" status (infected but haven't yet shown signs of disease) can affect public health more broadly such as through donated blood products and contaminated surgical instruments.

Australia has never fed sheep to cows, and so it never created the problem that so many other countries are still suffering from. In these circumstances it seems odd for the Government to decide that even "low risk" of primary Australian cases is preferable to the "zero risk" status quo, unless they are driven solely by short-term economic concerns.

If we are relying on the market to decide, we need to be fair to consumers about the origins of what they are eating. Putting it inside a sausage skin or some pastry isn't enough. Tell us where it's from. Children and those who rely on cheaper foods to get by are the ones most likely to consume these imported products, and if misleading food labelling continues, kids and their parents will almost certainly eat these things without knowing.

Now that should be a real barbecue stopper.