

national information forum

Working for the inclusion of disabled and other disadvantaged people
by encouraging better information provision

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For members of the National Information Forum*

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NIF TO WIND UP

Because of limited human resources the Forum's trustees have concluded that we can no longer adequately fulfil our charitable objectives and have reluctantly decided that the National Information Forum should be wound up on 31 March 2011. In accordance with our Memorandum of Association, the remaining assets, after payment of any outstanding liabilities, will be passed to like-minded charities chosen by the trustees. It is possible, however, that the regular news briefing will be continued by other means. Should there be any outstanding claims on the Forum, they should be presented by 21 March.

The Forum was founded in 1980, when Ann Darnbrough gathered together a number of representatives of organisations interested in improving the provision of information to disabled people. The grouping was encouraged by the 1981 International Year of Disabled People, and gained charitable status in 1985. It subsequently extended its focus to include other disadvantaged groups. Over the years, recognition of the importance of information provision has greatly increased, and we hope that we have played a small part in that revolution.

THE DIMINISHING SOCIETY

We believe that, under previous administrations, there used to be a 'big society': a flourishing voluntary sector. Of course, it could have been bigger, but that will always be so. It operated on the basis that modest funding could attract added value through voluntary effort from people dedicated what they saw as areas of need. We think that this principle was latterly eroded under the Labour government, when it moved to prefer to award funding to organisations prepared to provide public services, under contract, to fulfil its own agenda. It is now being further discouraged (we would not go so far as to say decimated) by government cuts. We hope that the coalition is slowly getting the message.

MENTAL HEALTH REMAINS THE LAST WORKPLACE TABOO!

This report, commissioned by the Shaw Trust, shows that major barriers remain for people with mental health conditions seeking employment. Of 500 business leaders surveyed:

- 40% regarded such workers as a significant risk
- 42% continue to underestimate the prevalence of mental health in their workplace
- Many applicants feel it is not in their best interests to disclose their condition

- 72% of workplaces still have no formal mental health policies.

Go to www.shaw-trust.org.uk/our_research for a full report.

LIFE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

The Office for Disability Issues has published interim results of a survey carried out by the Office for National Statistics on its behalf. Particularly valuable is a series of fact sheets providing a summary of findings on specific issues. To give some idea of the flavour, the fact sheet on 'Accessibility outside the home' reported the six most common buildings where difficulty with access was experienced for adults with impairments in 2009/10, as follows:

Shops:	54%
Hospitals:	33%
Pubs, bars, restaurants:	23%
GP surgeries:	21%
Other people's homes:	20%
Theatres or cinemas:	17%

Other issues covered, which confirm the extent of disadvantage experienced by disabled people, include employment and economic life and living standards. Given the importance of this kind of information we found it extraordinarily difficult to locate.

Go to <http://odi.dwp.gov.uk> and look at the **Publications Index**.

SCAMBUSTERS

During February the Office of Fair Trading ran a scams awareness campaign designed to educate people, particularly elderly people, about how they can protect themselves. That month, of course, is now over, but the need for vigilance remains. Regrettably, cunning schemes to rip-off the unwary have become an escalating feature of modern life. The OFT reckons that nearly half of the UK population has been targeted by a scam, and that every year more than three million adults fall victim to bogus schemes, losing a total of around £3.5 billion.

The campaign was run in partnership with local trading standards services. It included a free booklet *Scambuster: your guide to beating the scammers* giving advice about how consumers can protect themselves against these tricks and also what to do if they have been deceived. We ask all organisations on our mailing list to publicise this guide. Copies can be obtained by phoning 0800 389 3158 or e.mailing oft@ecgroup.co.uk, quoting code OFT831PR (OFT831PRw for a Welsh version).

ASPIRIN

As widely reported, researchers led by Professor Peter Rothwell have found that a low (75mg) daily dose of aspirin, taken over years, can significantly cut the risk of dying from certain cancers. For those who prefer to rely on original sources there was an article in *The Lancet* (1 January 2011, vol.377, no.9759, pp 31-41). A summary is available at www.thelancet.com as *Effect of daily aspirin on long-term risk of death due to cancer: analysis of individual patient data from randomised trials*.

NAIDEX

This year's homecare and disabled living exhibition will be held at the NEC Birmingham from 5 to 7 April (www.naidex.co.uk).

UK PUBLIC LIBRARY CATALOGUE

OCLC, the world's largest library co-operative, together with TCR, The Combined Regions inter-lending co-operative will soon launch a web-based catalogue of public library holdings in the UK with free public access. For more information, e.mail: uk@oclc.org.

From **CILIP Update, February 2011**.

MPs WARN AGAINST BENEFIT REFORMS

Evictions and increased homelessness among disabled people are an inevitable result of the Government's housing benefit reforms, MPs have been told.

In a report on the likely impact of reforms, the Commons work and pensions committee – chaired by disabled MP Anne Begg – urged the Government to monitor how they affect disabled people.

The committee also said the government should work with local authorities to address the need for an adequate supply of affordable and accessible housing for disabled people.

The committee welcomed plans to allow disabled people to claim extra housing benefit from April 2011 if they need a room for a live-in care worker.

But it said this should be extended to cover all disabled people who need more space, for example for wheelchair access, a guide dog, essential equipment, or where a child cannot share a room with a sibling because of their impairment.

From ‘All Together Now!’, February/March 2011

FORCED MARRIAGE

Respond, a charity that supports adults and children with learning disabilities, their families, carers and professionals, has produced a number of free easy-read booklets: *What is abuse?*, *Are you being bullied?*, and most recently, *Am I being forced to marry?* The latter booklet has been funded by the government’s Forced Marriage Unit in consultation with Respond’s Action Group and members of the London Steering Group on the Forced Marriage of People with Disabilities.

Easy-read is fine, but on page 3 of the booklet on forced marriage it would have been better not to have said “Both men and women can be forced to marry”, which might be read as indicating that it is permissible. The context of the booklet dispels any such notion, but it would have been better to emphasise “Forced marriage is against our law, but can happen to both women and men”.

Respond has a freephone helpline on 0808 808 0700 and its services include an independent advisor on sexual violence. *Am I being forced to marry?* can be ordered at www.forcedtomarry.com or by e.mail from louise.wallis@respond.org.uk.

The Forced Marriage Unit is a joint initiative of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office. It can initiate action in cases of forced marriage and offer advice and assistance to victims of forced marriage or threatened by it, people worried about friends or relatives and professionals working in the field. Telephone 020 7008 0151. Further details at www.fco.gov.uk (search for Forced Marriage Unit).

OFT STUDY OF THE MARKET IN MOBILITY AIDS

The mobility aids sector has attracted a large number of calls to Consumer Direct voicing concerns that it is not working well for consumers. The Office of Fair Trading has therefore proposed a study to consider the functioning of the market and whether there is potential for improvement.

Among the factors likely to be considered are whether consumers have access to the right information to make informed choices when seeking products to suit their individual needs and means, and whether they are being treated fairly.

CARE IN CARE HOMES.....

As ever, *The Week* (issue 801) provides valuable insights by picking up key letters from newspapers: in this case from *The Independent*. The first, from a Swiss social worker, presently caring for elderly people in the UK, alleges that the quality of social and intellectual interaction in our care homes is, almost everywhere, close to zero. And that the professional standard in British care homes is incredibly low: virtually anyone without a criminal conviction can work as a professional carer. The second letter is even more fundamental. It regrets a culture in Britain that deems it acceptable to place the care of elderly parents in the hands of others.

.....AND IN HOSPITALS

If you search for 'Care of elderly people in hospital' on the internet you will find a chorus of disapproval. There is Michael Parkinson, who complained of incidents that were "absolutely barmy and cruel beyond belief"; a report from the National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcomes and Death, which found that only a third of elderly patients admitted to hospital for an operation get good care [or to put it another way, two thirds do not]; Michelle Mitchell of Age UK, who commented "far too often older people in the UK receive second or even third rate care in hospital, condemning many of them to an early death". Now we have a well-publicised report from the Health Service Ombudsman, Ann Abraham (www.ombudsman.org.uk/care-and-compassion) who says that "the reasonable expectation that an older person or their family may have of dignified, pain-free end of life care, in clean surroundings in hospital, is not being fulfilled. Instead, these accounts present a picture of NHS provision that is failing to respond to the needs of older people with care and compassion and to provide even the most basic standards of care".

The report highlights only ten cases, but points out that they are not exceptional or isolated. Of nearly 9,000 complaints about the NHS to the Ombudsman in the last year, 18% were about the care of older people. The issues highlighted in the ten stories – dignity, healthcare associated infection, nutrition, discharge from hospital and personal care – featured significantly more often in complaints about the care of older people. The investigations are being laid before Parliament, under section 14(4) of the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993.

Parliament faces a massive problem. It was reported in October 2010 that the number of elderly people being treated in hospital had risen by 66% in ten years, and this figure is set to rise still further. We understand that the majority of hospital beds are now occupied by elderly people. One dimension that is not being discussed is the fact that in many cases we are simply living too long, that is to say beyond the point of life being enjoyable and fulfilling. Even if care can be perfected, it may not make good the quality of life that nature has eroded.

REFERENDUM

For what it is worth, we favour alternative voting (AV) against first past the post voting (FPPV). What is important is why. We see the choice as a simple one, between pragmatism (FPPV) and principle (AV). FPPV is simpler and less likely to produce a hung Parliament, but means that our representatives can be, and commonly are, elected by a minority of those voting. In safe seats, of which there are many, this anomaly can be perpetuated for decades. AV ensures that by taking into account alternative preferences the eventual winner has broad majority support.

We actually prefer AV to proportional representation, which we feel carries the danger of giving power to candidates with quite limited electoral support – possibly to distasteful parties.

By coincidence we have been reading Rev. Dr. Richard Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (1776). He saw it as important that people given the trust of government should hold office only for short terms, chosen by a majority of the state and subject to their instructions. Further that there is nothing that requires more to be watched than power...nothing that ought to be opposed with more determined resolution than its encroachments.

KINDLE EBOOK READER

This is a battery-operated device marketed by Amazon, currently priced at £111. You can shop for and store up to 3,500 ebooks from a choice of 550,000, including UK and international newspapers, magazines and blogs, plus more than 1 million free books. It has many popular features, but our chairman, Maurice Glassman, particularly welcomes the fact that whereas conventional books can be difficult to hold in bed, the Kindle reader is lightweight, easy to read, and is said to be "better for your sleep". Amazon has recently revealed that it has sold more Kindle ebooks than paperbacks in the US during the last three months of 2010. Details are at www.amazon.co.uk. There are, of course, other readers on the market and alternative access to free ebooks, and we have no hidden agenda.

NHS DIRECT

Please be aware (we were not) that this is an information service only. They are not able to answer questions based on symptoms and cannot provide medical advice if you are unwell. Diagnoses can be carried out only by a suitably qualified health professional after a consultation and/or examination. You can, however, discuss your symptoms with a nurse on 0845 46 47. And the service can supply information on named conditions diagnosed by your GP or qualified health professional.

WE HATE NO. 39: SLAUGHTERHOUSES

“Man is the only animal that can remain on friendly terms with the victims he intends to eat until he eats them.”

Samuel Butler

“If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone in the world would be a vegetarian.”

Sir Paul McCartney, PETA video (also credited to Linda McCartney)

The fact that abattoirs are openly known as slaughterhouses is indicative of a common perception that their function is acceptable in a civilised society and nothing of which to feel ashamed. Moral reservations are mostly confined to a hope (not necessarily an informed hope) that the slaughter will be humane. The industry is embedded in human history and generally seen, at worst, as a necessary evil. Yet is this tolerance reasonable? Is it not perverse that our children tend to be brought up to be fond of farm animals, yet kept in ignorance of the contradiction of their eventual fate? Can we reconcile our approval of the distress involved in the transportation of and slaughter of animals when should similar treatment be meted out to humans (as it has been) it would be seen as an unmitigated evil?

We think that there is a collective myopia and hypocrisy about the systematic slaughter of animals for food. So let us start unequivocally by saying that we hate the whole sorry business. The fact that the circumstances of killing in some slaughterhouses is less than humane merely makes our abhorrence more acute.

The animal rights charity PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals Foundation) has long campaigned against the meat industry’s “rampant abuse” of animals, attacking not only the manner of their slaughter, but conditions on today’s factory farms. They say that the “green pastures and idyllic barnyard scenes of years past are now distant memories”. In the present day, “billions of individual animals are violently killed for their flesh every year – whilst others spend almost their entire lives confined to filthy cramped conditions.” To back up their condemnation, they have produced a short video, fronted by Sir Paul McCartney, showing something of “the horrific abuse that the meat and dairy industries inflicts on animals”.

We echo these views, but our concern is here focused on the killing industry. When we say that this is embedded, it is to suggest that there never has been anything idyllic about animal slaughter. It has simply been accepted and sustained by a widespread belief that humankind has a pre-eminent place in the world and that eating flesh to sustain our well-being is somehow mysteriously sanctified. Thus our approach to animal slaughter belongs to a long, we are tempted to say holy, tradition. To quote the anonymous author of *Cursor’s Remarks on the Evil Tendency of Unrestrained Cruelty, Particularly on That Practised at Smithfield Market* (1823):

“Man has the vanity, the preposterous arrogance, to fancy himself the only worthy object of divine regard; and in proportion as he fancies himself such, considers himself authorised to despise, oppress, and torment all the creatures which he regards as his inferiors...”

We found this quotation in Sarah Wise’s *The Italian Boy*, an account of murder and grave-robbery in 1830s London (Cape, 2004). She devotes a whole chapter to *Meat*, which she describes as “an interlude”. It is indeed a diversion from the main subject, but a valuable one. Drawing on evidence heard by the 1828 Select Committee on Smithfield she recounts the horrors of the meat trade in nineteenth century London. How animals were driven to London for sale or slaughter from all over Great Britain, covering 15 to 20 miles a day; those from the north parked up in grazing counties before the final march to the capital, then assembled at Islington from where City of London drovers took over the difficult task of negotiating London’s busy streets, “often with calamitous consequences”. Beatings with vicious goads, for all to see, were routine. Those

beasts consigned to slaughter met their fate in primitive slaughterhouses, usually in Smithfield, Whitechapel, Shoreditch or Leadenhall Market, and frequently in cellars or back yards of private houses. Smithfield was one of the worst places, stinking and ankle deep in offal, faeces, urine and filth. Sarah Wise quotes Dickens's description of "filth and fat and blood and foam" in his *Great Expectations*. The Select Committee was told of commonplace brutality of the most horrific kind that had been tolerated for years. Yet in the early part of the nineteenth century attempts to legislate were regularly defeated in Parliament. It was only in 1822 that a Bill to prevent cruelty, moved by Richard Martin, MP for Galway, finally succeeded. Given the nickname 'Humanity Dick', Martin was also zealous in his efforts to bring abusers to justice. A Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was established in 1824 (gaining its 'Royal' prefix in 1840). But attempts to extend Martin's Act, failed on nine occasions between 1823 and 1826, and it was not until 1835 that wider legislation was finally accepted. We have a copy of the final Bill before us. It recognised that accidents frequently arose from improperly driving cattle and that "many and great cruelties" were occasioned by driving cattle, in their slaughter and in keeping them without food and nourishment. And the Act, while not questioning the need for slaughter, marked a genuine attempt to regulate the trade and improve the welfare of animals.

Such is something of the historical background. It may reasonably be thought that in Britain today protection for animals has greatly improved. We now have relatively new welfare legislation, and specific regulations relating to killing and slaughter were introduced in 1995 (*The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter and Killing) Regulations 1995*, as subsequently amended). These make it an offence to cause avoidable excitement, pain or suffering, and lay down rules on handling, stunning and slaughtering animals. All abattoirs are currently supervised by official veterinarians and inspectors employed by the Food Standards Agency Operations Group. So, apart from the sensitivities of those of us who unreservedly hate animal slaughter, what is there to worry about? Well first of all are the legal provisions that continue to allow the ritual slaughter of animals without stunning in order to accommodate Jewish and Muslim codes. Thus, specifically, cruelty is permitted in the name of religion to provide kosher meat (Jewish) and halal meat (Muslim). Evidence, we feel, that not everyone is equal before the law. Followers of this tradition argue that such killing is quick and humane, but as Johann Hari comments in a perceptive article in *The Independent* (The Religious Excuse for Barbarity, 19 November 2010) the scientific consensus is that it causes "very significant pain and distress".

As to the rest of the meat trade – about three quarters of it - the fact of the matter is that there are new imperatives which in practice can give rise to abuse and which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to entirely control. We understand that there are some well-run slaughterhouses, but in others economic pressures and the level of demand have given rise to animals being 'processed' at relentless, and unacceptable, line speeds. Regulation is not easy, since neither vets nor inspectors can be everywhere all the time, and when abuse is spotted in requires immense courage to halt production. There have been relatively few prosecutions, and although the regulations provide for custodial sentences, none has been imposed on the actual abusers. Between 2002 and 2010 there were only 31 convictions, and fines averaged out at a derisory £1,100.

It could be argued that this is because abuse is uncommon. But the reality has been vividly exposed in a recent report by the charity Animal Aid. *Behind Closed Doors*, researched and written by Kate Fowler and published in November 2010, reveals the findings of an investigation, using hidden cameras. Between January 2009 and April 2010 Animal Aid secretly filmed inside seven English red meat slaughterhouses, providing reliable evidence of what has truly taken place in six of them (identified in the report). The many distressing scenes filmed included:

- animals being kicked in the face, slapped, stamped on, picked up by fleeces and ears, and forcibly thrown across or into stunning pens
- animals screaming and struggling to escape
- animals going to the knife without adequate stunning
- animals stunned and then allowed to recover consciousness
- electric tongs used maliciously on the snouts, ears, tails, bodies and open mouths of pigs, resulting in the animals being given painful electric shocks
- pigs being jabbed viciously in the face with electric tongs
- ewes being stunned while a lamb suckled them

- a sheep too sick to stand – or possibly already dead – being brought to slaughter in a wheelbarrow
- a pig bleeding after being deliberately hit in the face with a shackle hook
- improperly stunned animals being stood on to keep them still while shackles were attached
- pigs falling from the shackle line into the blood pit and then being dragged through groups of live pigs
- animals being decapitated before the appropriate statutory time had elapsed, and while the animals may still have been alive
- long periods elapsing between electrical stunning and ‘sticking’ (throat cutting), increasing the likelihood that animals regain consciousness
- cows being stunned in a pen that was missing its head shelf. This allowed animals to move around, making an accurate head shot more difficult to achieve and increasing the risk of blotched stuns.

The evidence is clear. The footage from one slaughterhouse shocked Steve McGrath, CEO of the former Meat Hygiene Service. He said: “I have watched the film and have seen abject cruelty by the slaughtermen to the animals being killed, ineffective stunning, animals having the necks dislocated and heads decapitated before being fully bled, pigs being kicked, shackled before stunning. These are not technicalities”. Tim Smith, CEO of the Food Standards Agency, wrote of the footage taken at another slaughterhouse: “The cruelty on show is the worst I’ve seen.”

The Guardian picked up on the scandal on 4 February (while we were writing this article). It provided an expert view by Felicity Lawrence, author of the bestselling exposes *Not on the label* and *Eat your heart out*. Her comment made no bones about the fact that meat processing “has traditionally been a dirty industry” and that “a culture of macho bullying persists in many parts of it”. She noticed that Tim Smith has frequently spoken about what he calls the “disgraceful” intimidation faced by meat inspectors in UK factory abattoirs. He had also “forcefully and publicly told the British red meat industry, in which breaches of hygiene and BSE regulations are frequent, that it needs to clean up its act generally”. Lawrence went on to identify the roots of the problem, pointing out that: “Abattoirs today are noisy, relentless places in which animals are processed at speed and workers have no control over how fast the carcasses come at them over long, tiring shifts”. She argued that: “Killing animals day in, day out for hours at a time leaves no room for sentimentality”. It also inevitably desensitises some of those employed to carry out the mass slaughter.

Animal Aid is campaigning for CCTV to be installed in all slaughterhouses. They have the support of the RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming, the Soil Association and the Food Standards Agency. The union that represents slaughtermen and meat inspectors is not opposing the proposal and a number of leading supermarkets are demanding that CCTV be installed in the abattoirs that supply them with meat.

Our view is that while universal CCTV surveillance in stunning and killing areas would indeed mark a significant step forward, neither legislation, regulation, inspection nor the sentences handed down by our judiciary are likely to suffice to curb abuse in this distressing trade. The only realistic hope for change lies with consumers, simply to forego the pleasure of eating meat (which may actually damage their health), facing up to fact that being a carnivore inevitably requires killing and involves their complicity in a hateful process.

This briefing has been compiled by Ann Darnbrough and Derek Kinrade. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the National Information Forum. Earlier briefings and the ‘We Hate’ series are available on the Forum’s website: www.nif.org.uk.