I ask colleagues to imagine a bowl of fresh green salad, but rather than sprinkling it with the salad dressing of their choice, I would like them to imagine sprinkling it with some diseased badger urine—urine from a badger that has lesions in its kidneys, which sadly is commonly the case. Before pasteurisation made milk absolutely safe to drink, countless thousands of people died from bovine TB, because the disease can be spread through ingestion. It is very important to understand that for several reasons, particularly those related to biosecurity.

I absolutely support the comments that have been made about the importance of biosecurity and preventing cattle-to-cattle spread. However, a farmer can take all the effort he or she wants to keep badgers out of cowsheds, but those cattle are still grazing on infected pastures and will still be at risk. We are talking about closed herds with no concerns about TB being imported from outside, which is an important route for transmission.

Reference has been made to super-dairies and huge herds of cows, thousands strong, being kept inside. We do not want that. We all saw last year's campaign, "Cows need grass, not concrete", and I absolutely support that. However, in parts of South Hams in my constituency, putting cattle out on to infected pastures is tantamount to a death sentence—a form of culinary Russian roulette. We have to take this very seriously.

Let us look at the figures. In 1998 in my constituency, fewer than 600 cattle were culled; in 2010, that figure had risen to just short of 6,000. This is a dangerous zoonosis that is spreading inexorably year on year; we can look at the geographical maps and see the edge spreading. As other Members have said, sporadic cases are arising elsewhere which are undoubtedly due to the movement of cattle, but the inexorable spread that we see on the charts is due, in part, to the reservoir in badgers. Let us imagine how a dangerous zoonosis like this might spread out to other mammals; we are seeing it increasingly in deer, alpacas and pigs, and now in domestic pets as well. This is a real threat, so why have we not got a grip of the situation?

I should like to say something quite uncomfortable—that we are seeing the rise of the celebrity mammal. Indeed, we have a celebrity mammal here with us today, and very welcome he is too. We are beginning to focus on a single species, and that is unhelpful. I would challenge anybody to come down to South Devon and lay their hand on the side of one of the beautiful south Devon cattle and tell me that that animal is less important than the badger. All these animals are important, but there is a balance to be struck. When I step outside my door of an evening in South Devon, I frequently see badgers; they are a wonderful sight. The last time I saw a hedgehog was over five years ago. That element of balance is sometimes missing from this debate.

The rise of the celebrity mammal has been a barrier to science. Those on both sides of the debate rightly quote scientists, who will disagree about the issue; that is what scientists do. We want a robust debate, and I welcome it. The problem is that there were some flaws in
the randomised badger culling trial, particularly regarding the size of the triplets and the edge effect. In that circumstance, the right thing to do is to take matters further and consider pilots that explore the edge effect, but we are prevented from doing so because of the effect on politicians and the public of a focus on the needs of a specific animal, lovely as it may be. We need to tackle that issue head on.

Will the Minister say whether we are exploring the PCR—polymerase chain reaction—test further? We want to have a test of greater sensitivity and specificity that will allow us to test badger droppings, and then perhaps look to a further trial, even on whole-sett humane underground culling. There are also issues to do with perturbation, such as the effect of picking off one animal at a time. I suggest that we would be perturbed in an entirely different way if someone picked off members of our families one by one.

Let us see more focus on the science. Let us tackle this as a dangerous zoonosis. Let us also look at vaccination. The important point is that if any Member in this House developed any sort of TB, they would be looking at weeks and weeks of a complex antibiotic regime. Any doctor who treated them with vaccination would be struck off. It is not possible to cure an infected badger with a vaccination. Of course I want to see vaccination and prevention in disease-free animals. However, we should not pretend that we can extrapolate the results from an injectable vaccine, which may indeed show a slight reduction in the amount of TB excreted in urine by infected badgers, to oral vaccines. Oral vaccines and injectable vaccines are entirely different, and so we must be very careful.

I fully support a move towards greater investment in vaccination, but perhaps that is because I am a people person. I went into medicine rather than go to veterinary school because I think that people matter more. I was rewarded for that—I was never bitten by a patient in 24 years.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

No, I am going to carry on, if I may.

The point is, yes, let us see investment, but we want to see an oral bait vaccine. I want to leave a question in the air: is there something obscene about the amount of money we are going to spend on trapping and vaccinating every single wild badger in this country, year on year, when there are other things that that money could be spent on? I want to see an oral bait vaccine and an improved test, but we have to be honest and tackle a dangerous zoonosis. We have to be honest about the need for further scientific pilots and I am afraid that we have to do it now, because farmers in my constituency are suffering. Theses are the people who feed the nation—they put food on our plates and care for our countryside.

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