

## Prologue

Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague th'inventor; this even-handed justice  
Commends the ingredients of our poisoned chalice  
To our own lips.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 1

Mao Li Lin turned the dead rabbit over. She had commented only the morning before how healthy it seemed as she watched it investigate then avidly nibble the cabbage leaves thrown into the hutch. Now it lay stretched out on the cage floor; still warm, head thrown back, jaundiced eyes unseeing. Even so, the nestlings the rabbit had been suckling seemed active enough. This prompted Li Lin to gently transfer them to the nest of another rabbit feeding a small litter of about the same age. 'What should I do with the carcass?' she thought, unaware that it was the first of many deaths to come.

The emergence in 1984 of a new, highly lethal rabbit disease in China was destined to be controversial. The first reports of the disease involved a few angora stud rabbits recently imported from Eastern Germany. Soon it was spreading quickly, from rabbitry to rabbitry. It struck not only where households kept a few rabbits in small crowded courtyards, but also within large rabbit farms. The toll quickly mounted to hundreds of rabbits, then thousands, then millions (Liu *et al.* 1984).

China dominated international trade in rabbit meat, exporting over 50 000 tonnes annually. But slowness in pinpointing the cause of the disease, inadequate animal hygiene measures and a lack of international notification inevitably meant that contaminated rabbit meat was exported. The Republic of Korea was the next country where the disease was reported, and a Chinese shipment of rabbit meat to Mexico City triggered an outbreak among domestic rabbits there (Gregg *et al.* 1991).

When the disease appeared in more distant Italy in 1985 it was initially referred to as 'malattia X' or 'disease X' for lack of understanding that it was the same scourge as rabbit haemorrhagic 'pneumonia' in China. As it was found in more and more countries across Europe, the official name became rabbit haemorrhagic disease, usually abbreviated to RHD. By 1990 a virus was identified as the cause; it was referred to as RHDV.

As its name implies, RHD is confined to rabbits, and the European rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* at that. The virus is not known to cause disease in any other species, even other closely related rabbits and hares. Perhaps because of this, and because it was handled by veterinarians, the initial outbreak and spread was largely overlooked when it came to analysing and understanding newly emerging diseases. There has been much more intense interest in new diseases that have transferred from animals to humans, such as H5N1 avian influenza and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002. In many ways, experiences with RHD might have provided a preview of the difficulties of east–west communication over newly