Transgenic futures: narratives of the medicine cow

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In December 1993 researchers from the University of Kuopio in Finland announced that they had developed a transgenic calf by grafting the gene for human red cell growth factor. The innovation was described as the ‘world’s first medicine calf’. The promise was that eventually, the cow would produce milk that contains erythropoietin, a valuable protein that is used among other things in the treatment of anemias, cancer and aids. A company called FinnGene was launched to commercialise the product.

Two years later, FinnGene was taken over by a Dutch company, Gene Pharming Europe. The company announced new plans to create a herd of transgenic cattle in Finland to produce lactoferrin in its milk. They signed up local cattle farmers.

>From the very outset the story of the medicine cow was constructed as a hero story, a symbol for Finnish know know and the economic prospects of biotechnology. The great promise of Morrow the Cow brought together the national narrative of science (‘Finnish research excellence’), the notion of science as a sports-like competition, the promise of conquering diseases (‘medicine milk’), and the idea of genetically modified animals as ‘bioreactors’.

The paper will analyse the construction - and later the deconstruction - of the ‘medicine cow’ in public discourse from 1993 to the present. I am particularly interested in the rhetorics of the future: the narrative shaping of future promises, the politics of naming and the role of the news media in producing and circulating images of new genetics.