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CONTACTS WITH THE MEDIA

In the present state of awareness about public health matters members of staff have been approached on many occasions by the media to give interviews. Editing can always be a problem in such instances and in a few cases officers have been quoted, or misquoted, in such a way that there could be unwelcome consequences. Such a case has occurred very recently and the CVO has asked that RVOs remind their staff of the need for caution. I should therefore be grateful if you could bring this to the notice of your staff as a matter of urgency and also refer them to Sections E3 and E5 of the Staff Manual.

You will appreciate that full briefing on any subject is absolutely essential before facing the media and it is when that briefing is deficient that slips are made. As BSE is topical and the Southwood Report has just been published, I enclose a Question and Answer on that Report which you may find useful. The Q & A is for your personal use and may also be disclosed to DVOs but should not have a wider circulation.



I CRAWFORD
3 March 1989

Territorial RVOs (England, Scotland & Wales)

cc: Mr W G Gerrand

89/03.03/9.1

BOVINE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY: SOUTHWOOD REPORT

QUESTION AND ANSWER BRIEF

HUMAN HEALTH RISKS

Q.1 Are there any?

A.1 Working Party conclude that from present evidence it is most unlikely that BSE will have any implications for human health. However, they add that if their assessment proves incorrect, the implications would be extremely serious. They therefore welcome the speed with which MAFF has implemented their interim recommendations (slaughter and disposal of suspected BSE cattle, prohibition on sale or use of milk, extension of feed ban).

Q.2 Further research into human health risks?

A.2 The Working Party have recommended that the recently established Consultative Committee on research (the Tyrrell Committee) should consider a number of areas of possible research, such as transmission experiments in muscle and milk, which may lead to complete reassurance about the lack of risk to human health.

Q.3 If humans were susceptible to infection with BSE, what form would the illness take?

A.3 The Working Party conclude that such an illness would closely resemble the existing human spongiform encephalopathy, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD).

Q.4 What are the symptoms of CJD?

A.4 At the beginning there is usually disturbance of walking, balance and co-ordination with dulling of the intellect. Vision and speech can also be affected. Memory and motor function progressively deteriorate. Total incapacity and

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(myoclonus), are seen at the end. The illness can take only a few weeks between the first evidence something is wrong until death, but 8 months or so is more usual. There is no cure.

Q.5 How common is spongiform encephalopathy in humans?

A.5 Very rare, with 30-40 cases a year recognised in England and Wales. This is in the usual international range of 0.5 to 1.0 cases per million per year.

Q.6 When will we know for certain whether people have been infected by BSE?

A.6 The Working Party concludes this may take a decade or more.

Q.7 Can CJD be acquired from eating sheep infected with scrapie?

A.7 CJD is a very rare disease with an incidence of around 0.5 to 1.0 cases per million. It occurs in most countries in the world, and has been known for many years. In most cases the source of the infection cannot be determined. In this country scrapie has been endemic for centuries without any evidence to show a higher incidence of CJD in the population than in other countries. CJD occurs in Australia, where scrapie has never been found. Research designed to discover an association with sheep infected with scrapie has not identified any such risk.

Q.8 Why are we so sure patients who have recently had CJD have not caught the disease from cows?

A.8 ^{It is difficult to see how this could be so.} ~~This is just not possible.~~ ^{was} The disease has only ~~recently been~~ identified in cattle, ^{at the end of 1986, and it is unlikely that more than a handful of cases could be traced.} and the likely incubation period in humans would be too long for any current cases of CJD to be causally linked to BSE. In any case, the working party think it very unlikely BSE will present any risks to humans.

Q.9 How could someone tell if they are carrying the infection?

A.9 In the very unlikely event that someone becomes infected with BSE, there would be no way of detecting this until they fall ill, just as there is currently no test for detecting who is going to develop CJD.

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- another?
- A.10 Just as there is no reason to believe cows can pass BSE on to each other, and humans cannot pass on CJD, there is thought to be no chance of BSE infection passing from one human to another, with the possible exception of transplanted organs.
- Q.11 Is Alzheimer's disease like BSE?
- A.11 No, although Alzheimer's is a dementia, it is not a spongiform encephalopathy and is not generally regarded as being transmissible nor caused by any sort of infectious agent.
- Q.12 Which bits of cows are infected?
- A.12 We know for certain the brains are infected. Assuming BSE is like scrapie, then in early stages of disease lymphoid tissue (like the spleen and thymus), the spinal cord and the placenta may also be infected. Some other internal organs such as liver and kidney may also carry low levels of the agent. However we won't know for certain whether these parts contain the agent until more research is completed.
- Q.13 Is rare beef safe?
- A.13 On theoretical grounds, beef steak is very unlikely to be infected, and we can feel reassured knowing scrapie-infected sheep meat has been eaten for generations without apparent ill-effects.
- Q.14 Why concern about offal in baby food and not when eaten by adults?
- A.14 It seems young animals are more susceptible than adults to orally-acquired spongiform encephalopathies. The Chief Medical Officer's advice on the relevance of this to human populations is being sought.

BY FOODS

Q.15 What does Southwood mean and what are the implications of the statement in the Report that they "consider that manufacturers of baby foods should avoid the use of ruminant offal and thymus"?

A.15 The term "offal" mentioned in the report refers to brain, spinal cord, spleen and intestine, as defined in the regulations quoted. The CMO is satisfied that none of these nor thymus is currently used in the manufacture of baby food. CMO also advised that mothers ought not to feed these materials to infants. The term offal does not refer to kidney, liver and heart. There is no need for concern about these are extremely nutritious foods which are beneficial.

Q.16 What about bovine offal (brains, spleen, spinal cord and intestine) in uncooked meat products?

A.16 These are prohibited from use in uncooked meat products.

Q.17 What about cooked meat products?

A.17 Spinal cord is removed at the abattoir and bovine brains are not used in meat product preparations. Other offals can be used but the label would have to declare it as offal or mention it specifically in the ingredients list.

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HEALTH AND SAFETY

Q.18 Is there a risk to people working with cattle?

A.18 The Health and Safety Executive have already been alerted to emergence of BSE. Working Party emphasise the importance of adhering to recommended procedures for handling animals and animal products.

Q.19 Further measures?

A.19 The Health and Safety Executive will be giving guidelines to occupational groups involved with cattle.

RESEARCH

Q.20 Has Government acted on recommendation to set up Consultative Committee?

A.20 Yes - a Consultative Committee has been established under Dr David Tyrrell to oversee and advise on research into BSE and the other transmissible encephalopathies. It will hold its first meeting in March.

Q.21 What areas of research are being undertaken now?

A.21 A number of areas of research have been under way for some time. These include epidemiological studies to examine the role of meat and bonemeal as the source of the disease and to determine whether cattle to cattle transmission can take place; transmission experiments (if asked using cattle, pigs, hamsters and marmosets) and genetics and molecular biological studies. Expenditure on research in 1988/89 alone is likely to be about £1 million.

Q.22 What about other areas of research which Working Party considers should be undertaken?

A.22 The other areas for research will be considered by the Tyrrell Committee who will then advise the Government.

Q.23 Is the Working Party recommending a total ban on the feeding of re-cycled animal waste to livestock? (Ban already applies to feeding of ruminant-based material to ruminants.)

A.23 No - they conclude that if animal waste is to continue to be re-cycled as animal protein feed it must be properly sterilised to eliminate the risk of disease transmission.

Q.24 Government attitude on this?

A.24 The Government will be giving further consideration to the Working Party's recommendations on animal feed in the light of the research which may be recommended by the Tyrrell Committee. The manufacture of processed protein feeds is a good way of using waste materials which it would be difficult to dispose of safely in other ways. Our concern is to ensure it is safe.

Q.25 Is there not a need for more immediate action?

A.25 Southwood concludes that the risk of BSE spreading to poultry is so remote that no action is appropriate at this stage. So far as pigs are concerned, transmission studies are already under way. The Government will, as Southwood recommends, be considering the whole issue in the context of the adjustment of the agricultural policy of the EC in coming years.

Q.26 What are they?

A.26 From 18 July last year (ie prior to any recommendations from Southwood) the Government banned feeding of ruminant-based protein rations to ruminants, since this is the most likely cause of the disease. This ban will remain in place unless possible to establish processing methods sufficient to kill the BSE agent. Research project under way.

zoological sense, to refer to the feeding of material which the animals in the wild state would not eat - in particular the feeding to herbivores of meat meals and bone meals derived from processing of animal materials.

Q.28 What is the Government's view on this?

A.28 Processed animal protein (meat meal and bone meal) is a nutritious feed which has been used for many years. Provided it is adequately processed and hygienically handled, it should not be a means of disease transmission. [It should be borne in mind that such processing and handling are likely to increase the cost of the material and thus make their use less financially attractive.]

Q.29 Although ruminant-based protein is banned in feed for ruminants, what about pigs and poultry?

A.29 Can still be fed to pigs and poultry.

Q.30 Is there a risk of transmitting BSE to poultry?

A.30 The Report concludes that the risks are so small that action is not appropriate at this stage.

Q.31 What about pigs?

A.31 The Report suggests that transmission experiments might be undertaken in pigs. In fact, the Government has already acted on this and has begun transmission experiments.

Q.32 What is reaction to recommendation Government should address problem of animal waste disposal "as part of the adjustment of the framework of the agricultural policy of the EC in coming years?"

A.32 There is some likelihood that proposals may be tabled soon for rules on the disposal of waste material in the Community. This would be an appropriate forum in which to consider this issue.

Q.33 Why not extend ban indefinitely as Southwood recommends?

A.33 This will be done unless we can identify conditions under which ruminant protein can be heat-treated so as to destroy the BSE agent.

Q.34 Control on imports of feed material?

A.34 Legislative provisions ensure that all feed which is a potential risk is not fed to ruminants.

How safe

Q.35 Why are imports a risk if no BSE elsewhere?

A.35 Has recently been reported in the Republic of Ireland. Do not know for certain that material from other countries is safe even though BSE may not have been reported. Other countries may have the same combination of critical factors which has led to the emergence of disease in this country.

Q.36 Exports of feed material containing animal protein materials?

A.36 If exports take place most used in pig and poultry feed. Importing countries well aware of the occurrence of BSE in this country. Up to them to decide whether to import and under what conditions.

Q.37 What are time/temperature combinations required to make product safe from BSE?

A.37 This is something we intend to establish precisely in consultation with the Neuropathogenesis Unit in Edinburgh since no definite information is available on the survival of the agent under conditions of processing currently applied in Great Britain. The stringent requirements for scrapie and CJD are given in the Report (para 3.9).

Q.38 Research?

A.38 Part of the continuing epidemiological study is to look at the relationship between the use of meat and bonemeal and the occurrence of BSE.

MILK PROHIBITION

Q.39 Why prohibition on milk from suspect BSE animals?

A.39 Government accepted the Working Party's interim recommendation that although in their view the transmission of BSE via milk very unlikely, it would be prudent, as a precautionary measure, to prohibit its use for human or animal consumption.

Q.40 Why not ban milk from the whole herd?

A.40 Absolutely no reason to ban use of milk from the whole herd, particularly since there is no evidence whatsoever of animal to animal spread. Furthermore, the Report confirms that milk has never been shown to be able to transmit any of the other spongiform encephalopathies. Also worth pointing out that in about 80% of cases only one animal in that herd has been affected.

Q.41 Why allow feeding to cow's own calf?

A.41 Unless someone present at birth, it is impossible to prevent sucking taking place; if there was a risk of maternal transmission it is likely to be from the placenta and not the milk. Could also be animal welfare problems if attempt made to prevent sucking.

Q.42 Research?

A.42 This is one of the areas which the Report recommends should be considered by the Tyrrell Committee, in essence to repeat earlier experiments which showed that milk was not a vehicle for scrapie transmission to any species.

Q.43 What about milk from cattle with pre-clinical BSE?

A.43 Measures in relation to clinically affected cattle only being taken as a precautionary measure on the advice of the Working Party. There is no scientific evidence that transmission is possible via milk. In addition, it has never been shown capable of transmitting any other of the spongiform encephalopathies.

Q.44 Why did it take so long (from late 1986 to until 1988) to start action against BSE?

A.44 In the first few months after the Central Veterinary Laboratory identified the disease, there were only a very few cases. It was impossible to draw any conclusions as to the cause until very thorough epidemiological studies had been carried out. This involved examining detailed records of artificial insemination, use of medicines, pesticides feed etc. It was only when a fuller picture emerged that appropriate action could be identified.

Q.45 Number of cases of BSE?

A.45 At 17 February 2,919 cases had been confirmed on 2,124 farms (out of about 4 million adult cattle in the country).

Q.46 What is geographical distribution?

A.46 Cases have occurred in most parts of the country, but with well over half in the South, particularly the South West.

Q.47 Why more in South?

A.47 Not clear, but studies continuing to try to determine why.

Q.48 Number of new cases each week?

A.48 In the last four weeks an average of 142 cases have been reported per week.

Q.49 How long will current incidence continue?

A.49 Long incubation period means that might be four years before current incidence begins to fall of significantly.

Q.50 Problems for exports?

A.50 No major difficulties but a number of countries have chosen either to ban imports of cattle, semen and embryos or to impose health conditions in relation to the importation of cattle.

- Q.51 What are the countries that have imposed an embargo for the time being?
- A.51 Australia, Israel and Sweden have imposed an embargo for the time being. Canada, Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa and the USA require additional certification prior to exports taking place.
- Q.52 What about semen and embryos?
- A.52 Australia's embargo covers semen and embryos as well as cattle. New Zealand and USA require certification for semen and embryos. The Republic of Ireland requires certification for embryos.
- Q.53 BSE spreading?
- A.53 No evidence of cattle to cattle spread - the cause is most likely to have been feeding of protein derived from ruminants (including sheep affected by scrapie) when the animals were calves. This now banned.
- Q.54 Is compensation at 50% of value sufficient?
- A.54 Yes, in view of fact that animal has terminal illness and is therefore of low value - but is valued for compensation purposes as if free from BSE.
- Q.55 Are farmers evading requirement to notify cases of BSE?
- A.55 No evidence from the numbers being reported. Southwood points out that transportation to a market or abattoir is likely to exacerbate the clinical signs of disease, making passing-off difficult.
- Q.56 Are there any disease-free cattle in Great Britain?
- A.56 Assuming there is no cattle-to-cattle transmission, all calves born after 18 July 1988, when the feed ban was imposed, should be disease free. There are also some herds where meat and bone meal has never been used. This means that over a period of years a reservoir of disease-free cattle will be built up.

Q.57 ...
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ill with spongiform encephalopathies such as BSE.

Q.58 Why not slaughter and destroy sheep affected with scrapie?

A.58 Scrapie has been around for over 200 years. It is widespread in the national sheep flock. There is no evidence that it affects humans, and there is therefore no need on public health grounds for a control scheme.