

SEAC

Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee

ANNUAL REPORT 2008

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Foreword

This report summarises the work of the SEAC during 2008. The Committee met twice in the course of the year, in April and in October. This was because the core business of the committee has declined because the vCJD and BSE control measures in place appear to be working extremely effectively. Thus, there was no critical business that could not be dealt with by correspondence while the committee maintained a watching brief on any scientific or other issues. Much of the committee's time was spent considering two very challenging issues: (i) the potential risks associated with proposed modifications of controls to protect human and animal health from Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) and (ii) how to understand better the number of people who may be infected with, but have not developed, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD). The advice that the committee provided informed Government decisions about altering BSE controls and plans for surveys of human tissues to assess the number of people infected with vCJD.

An independent review of the role and operation of SEAC was completed in the early part of 2008. I thank Mr Edmund Waterhouse for his instructive report. He noted that SEAC continues to have a key and important role in providing expert advice to government. However, the demands made on the committee by Government are reducing over time and he therefore suggested that SEAC meets less frequently. This proved to be the case during 2008, although a number of pressing issues were considered by Members in correspondence. This trend is likely to continue. In keeping with SEAC's commitment to openness, details of all business dealt with by the committee outside of meetings will be placed on the SEAC website.

I would like to thank Professor David Brown and Mr John Bassett, who completed their terms of office in 2008, for their time, commitment and input into the deliberations of the committee. I am as always grateful to all the researchers who presented their unpublished research, ensuring that the committee could consider important new data as these emerge.

There have been discussions with the sponsoring Departments to consider ways of working in the future to maximise effectiveness while ensuring appropriate use of time and resource. It is critical for the expertise of SEAC to remain to provide independent advice on risk to Government. Although risks from BSE and vCJD are now low advice is still essential, and may become more so, both in terms of relaxing Regulations but also to ensure that expertise can be gathered quickly should unanticipated problems arise. Changes in ways of working of SEAC to ensure it remains effective while able to provide appropriate

independent advice, are being considered and will be implemented next year.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of SEAC for their enthusiasm, dedication and insight. I would also like to thank the Secretary and Secretariat for the excellent scientific and administrative support they provide to SEAC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Higgins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Professor Chris Higgins

Chair of SEAC

About the Committee

SEAC is an independent expert advisory committee that provides scientific advice to the UK Government on TSEs such as BSE, classical and atypical scrapie and vCJD. Requests for advice may come from Government Departments, the Devolved Administrations, SEAC members, other advisory committees or enquiries from members of the public. The Chair of SEAC may convene Subgroups to examine specific issues in greater detail. Subgroups have terms of reference and are required to report to the main committee. There are two standing Subgroups, the SEAC Epidemiology and Sheep Subgroups.

The majority of SEAC's business is conducted at public meetings. Agendas, summaries, discussion papers and minutes of meetings are published on the SEAC website (see below). There are occasions when the committee considers certain information, such as pre-publication material or confidential medical data, in reserved business sessions. In the case of pre-publication material, once it has been published elsewhere, full details of the discussion and the relevant papers are placed on the SEAC website. Short summaries of all discussions are placed on the website within a week following a meeting. All material published on the website is also available on request from the SEAC secretariat.

Some SEAC business is conducted at other fora or by correspondence, but approved by the committee and recorded at a public meeting. An important example (consideration of a proposed reduction of testing of cattle slaughtered for food) undertaken in 2008 is outlined below.

SEAC website (www.seac.gov.uk)

The website carries:

- information about the committee's history, terms of reference and current membership
- agendas, discussion papers, summaries and minutes of meetings
- SEAC statements
- information about the membership and work of SEAC Subgroups
- a register of committee members' interests
- the SEAC code of practice and publication scheme

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- annual reports from 1997 onwards
 - reports of independent reviews of SEAC

Main issues considered by SEAC and SEAC Subgroups

SEAC met twice in 2008 (25th April and 15th October). The SEAC Epidemiology and Sheep Subgroups did not need to meet. The main issues considered are listed below. Readers can consult the papers, minutes and statements on the SEAC website for the full record of the committee's consideration of these issues and the conclusions and recommendations made, except for the items recorded in italics. These agenda items concerned unpublished and/or preliminary data and were considered in a reserved business session.

SEAC 100

- The assessment of the prevalence of subclinical vCJD.
- An update on the incidence of BSE in cattle in the UK and other countries, and on the progress of the European Union (EU) survey on TSEs in deer.
- The possible consequences of various options for relaxing the total feed ban including, the introduction of tolerance levels for certain types of processed animal protein (PAP) in feed, the inclusion of fish meal in young ruminant diets and the feeding of non-ruminant PAP to non-ruminants of a different species.
- The impact on the risk to human health regarding proposals to reduce testing of cattle slaughtered for food (see also below).
- Members' views on important issues on the TSE science horizon.

SEAC 101

- An update on vCJD prevalence studies.
- Further discussion on the impact on the risk to human health regarding proposals to reduce testing of cattle slaughtered for food (see also below).
- A risk assessment of changes to the levels of supervision of specified risk material (SRM) controls at abattoirs and cutting plants.

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- Consideration of an atypical scrapie case-control study by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA), the findings of the study and the possible implications.
 - Further discussion on the possible consequences of various options for relaxing the total feed ban considered at SEAC 100 and the agreement of a published statement on the subject.
 - *Unpublished data on a newly identified prion disease termed protease sensitive prionopathy (PSP_r).*
 - *Preliminary results from studies assessing infectivity in human sclera.*

SEAC statements

SEAC published the following statements in 2008:

- Potential human health risk from changes to classical scrapie controls.
- Procedure for use of previous SEAC opinions.
- Prevalence of subclinical variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease infections.
- Options relating to modification of the total feed ban.

SEAC Epidemiology Subgroup

The SEAC Epidemiology Subgroup did not meet in 2008.

SEAC Sheep Subgroup

The SEAC Sheep Subgroup did not meet in 2008, but a report of their 2007 meeting was endorsed at the SEAC 99 meeting (December 2007) and published in January 2008.

Proposals to reduce testing of cattle slaughtered for food

At SEAC 100, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) asked SEAC to consider an analysis by the VLA of the human health risk from

increasing the minimum age at which cattle are tested for BSE. At that meeting, members raised a number of questions which were addressed in correspondence and a draft conclusion on the issue was circulated to SEAC members for comment and agreement. This was discussed at SEAC 101 and the finalised conclusion (recorded in the minutes of SEAC 101) was presented by the SEAC Chair to the FSA Board on 15th October 2008 immediately following the SEAC meeting.

The SEAC Chair subsequently, in a letter¹ to the FSA Board, further explained the committee's views on risk assessments on changing the minimum age of testing and on 10th December 2008 the FSA agreed² to support the move to increase from 30 months to 48 months the age at which cattle slaughtered for human consumption are BSE tested.

Contact details

SEAC Secretariat
5th Floor
9 Millbank
c/o 17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR
Email: seacsecretariat@seac.gsi.gov.uk

¹ <http://www.seac.gov.uk/pdf/letter-081127.pdf>

² <http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2008/dec/bse>