

World Health Organisation says BSE is a major threat

By Paul Mitchell
6 July 2001

Scientists last month warned that Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or Mad Cow Disease, “has joined AIDS as a major health challenge facing the world.” A conference organised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) concluded with a call for governments to “strongly consider” testing for BSE in cattle used for human consumption and imposing a worldwide ban on meat and bonemeal cattle feed (MBM).

BSE and its human equivalent, variant Creutzfeldt Jacobs Disease (vCJD) cause a fatal wasting away of the brain. The infectious agent is believed to be a mis-shaped prion protein, causing the development of lesions in the brain. There is no cure for vCJD, although Dr John Collinge, director of the new prion unit at Imperial College in London believes that “in the next five years we may be able to produce something that provides a treatment for this disease”.

The disease has already claimed 102, mainly young victims in Britain, three in France and one in Ireland. There are suspected cases in Hungary, Hong Kong and elsewhere. The charity, Wellcome Trust, estimates there will be about a quarter of a million cases of vCJD in Britain by the year 2040.

Samuel Jutzi, director of the animal production and health division of the FAO, warned the conference of the possibility that BSE could spread far outside the European Union. He said “It’s safe to say that eastern Europe may have imported sizeable amounts of risk given the sheer trade figures we have. Another area may indeed be the Near and Middle East.” A few days later the first country in eastern Europe—the Czech Republic—reported a case of BSE. Since the Czech government only banned the use of high-risk cattle by-products for human consumption in January 2000, it

is clearly possible vCJD cases will start to appear there.

BSE was first recognised in Britain in the early 1980s. There have been 180,900 cases of BSE in Britain and officially there are still 1,500 cases a year. Changes in the rendering industry, and the increased use of MBM in cattle feed, are thought to have increased the spread of the disease.

In 1988, some time after MBM was suspected of spreading BSE, the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher banned its use in feed for ruminants such as cattle, sheep and goats in Britain. However, the government allowed the export of MBM until 1996 when it finally admitted a link between BSE and vCJD. Records show that over one million tonnes of MBM were exported from Britain to Asia between 1988 and 1996. According to Keith Meldrum, the government’s chief veterinary scientist at the time, it was “up to importing countries to stop accepting our exports.” For 11 years Britain exported the remains of BSE-infected cows to more than 80 countries where it was often repackaged and re-exported.

Where governments around the world have taken action against the BSE threat—and most claiming they are “BSE free” have not—the policies have been limited, uncoordinated and often unenforced. Protecting national business and agricultural interests by governments, industry and trade unions has been the major factor. The search for a suitable test and cure has therefore been delayed. The tests that are currently available are not sensitive enough to detect the small amounts of prions circulating in the blood (although two research groups are now developing tests) and it is still only possible to carry out tests on brain material where the prion is most concentrated. In Switzerland, where the first case of BSE occurred in 1990, *all cattle* are now tested for BSE after slaughter using a new

rapid testing method on the brain. The older method appeared to show a dramatic decline in the disease in 1998, but with the introduction of the new method the following year there was a four-fold increase in cases of BSE recorded. This points to massive underreporting in every other country, and Britain in particular.

On July 1, new EU BSE Regulations came into force due to the spread of the disease to Ireland, Portugal, Switzerland, France, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Liechtenstein and Luxemburg. Many of these countries had denied they had a BSE problem. Until tests proved otherwise, the German government declared the country to be BSE free. There have been 90 cases so far, 77 of them this year. In Spain, 48 cases has been detected—all but two of them this year.

The new regulations say that slaughterhouses must carry out a BSE test on all cattle over the age of 30 months that are used for human consumption and sick animals over 24 months. Some random tests of healthy cattle over 24 months must also be carried out. In Britain the government is only required to randomly test 50,000 cattle over the age of 30 months. The British Food Safety Agency (FSA) claim there is no need for any testing in Britain because of the national ban on the sale of beef from cattle over the age of 30 months. However, they will carry out the random testing in order to provide epidemiological evidence. The Agency said, “We support the right of other countries to test all cattle over 24 months, but in UK conditions we do not believe that testing under 30 months would provide additional public health protection.” The FSA press release states that “in the UK, testing has until now been carried out primarily among animals aged over 30 months”, but it does not say that the numbers tested were only 171 between January and May this year out of the European total of 3.5 million.

Professor Hugh Pennington, professor of bacteriology at the University of Aberdeen, condemned such complacency and omission. Pennington, who chaired the inquiry into the E.coli food poisoning outbreak in Lanarkshire, Scotland in 1996, said he feared “new food disasters on a similar scale to BSE... Nobody knows when the next food-borne bugs will arrive but they are evolving right now. I fear that without fundamental reform in the way policy makers get and use scientific advice there will be big trouble ahead.”

He continued that the Labour government is too secretive and criticised the link between science and industry.

Professor Richard Lacey, who was persecuted for his criticisms during the BSE crisis, says, “Blair continues to deceive. There are an unknown number of animals infected and people are still eating contaminated beef.”

These criticisms of the Labour government are borne out by the foot and mouth epidemic that has resulted in the infection of 1,800 farms and the slaughter of 3.5 million animals in the UK. In 1997 the Labour government’s Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee warned against feeding pigs waste meat. Jack Cunningham, the Agriculture Minister said at the time, “processing certain types of waste containing porcine material and feeding it as swill to pigs will have to end.” But the use of catering waste as swill continued. The current epidemic of foot and mouth disease is believed to have started from this source.

More than 90 burial sites were used to dispose of all the cattle slaughtered due to foot and mouth disease. The burials included cattle over five years old, which should have been incinerated under the government’s own BSE regulations. The government has now ordered the carcasses to be dug up to protect water supplies from infection with the BSE agent—a rather belated attempt because most body fluids will have leaked out after two months.

Such practices underscore that the BSE Inquiry set up by Labour two years ago in response to public outcry was an entirely cosmetic exercise. Only last month European veterinary inspectors published a report of their investigation into the British meat industry. It said processed meat products “gives rise to serious concern” and checks on raw materials used for food were “weak or even non-existent”.

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