

Britain

Damning testimony in government inquiry into BSE crisis

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The official government inquiry into the crisis involving BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), sometimes called mad cow disease, and its human form, new variant CJD (Creutzfeldt Jacobs Disease), began in London on Monday, March 9, shortly after the twenty-fourth British fatality from the disease was reported.

New variant CJD is also known as Human BSE. It is impossible to predict whether the final death toll from Human BSE will number in the hundreds, thousands or hundreds of thousands. However, testimony from relatives of the victims, scientists and others bears witness to a potential health disaster of major proportions.

On the first day of the inquiry Roger Tomkins, whose daughter Clare was diagnosed with Human BSE in July 1997, gave a moving statement. Tomkins described the progress of the disease. Clare first became ill in November 1996. The symptoms rapidly developed: depression, double vision, unsteady gait, weight loss, anxiety and fear, spasms, hallucinations, incontinence, aggression, loss of speech, and recently, inability to swallow.

He and his wife struggled to care for their daughter at home. His private insurance company refused to contribute to the cost of care because Clare was terminally ill. This had a devastating effect on the whole family. His wife is now seriously ill.

Colin Whitaker, a veterinarian from Ashford in Kent, told how he first identified the disease in a dairy cow in 1985. Other cases occurred and he sent specimens to the local Veterinary Investigation Centre, where Carl Johnson identified the presence of a condition typical of spongiform encephalopathy.

Whitaker and Johnson concluded they were dealing with a new “Scrapie-like syndrome” in cattle. (Scrapie is a disease of sheep.)

As Whitaker told the inquiry, he and Johnson were preparing to deliver a paper to the British Cattle Veterinary Association when Johnson received instructions from his employer, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), that the term “Scrapie-like” was not to be used. This revelation by Whitaker, indicating a cover-up at the earliest stages of the BSE crisis by the then-Tory government, was not probed by the panel, even though many experts believe the disease could have been stamped out had a proper investigation been carried out early on.

After his appearance before the inquiry panel, Whitaker told a journalist from the *World Socialist Web Site* he thought MAFF at first instigated the cover-up to protect the sheep trade, which would have been seen as the source of the outbreak of disease among cattle.

Professor Roy Anderson of Oxford University’s Centre for Infectious Diseases explained how MAFF had obstructed his investigation into BSE. Between 1989 and 1991 he had applied to them, in a bid to understand the growing epidemic, but was denied access to BSE data.

Key testimony was provided by Professor Richard Southwood, who was chairman of a committee set up by the MAFF in April 1988 to examine the implications of BSE for humans and animals. The Southwood committee was established two years after the disease was first identified and after thousands of infected carcasses had gone into the human food chain. None of the members of the committee were experts in the field of transmissible encephalopathies, and no such experts were ever co-opted.

MAFF made it plain they would not welcome any recommendations requiring an increase in public expenditure. Sir Donald Acheson, the government’s chief medical officer, told Southwood that all that was required

was “a very brief note with recommendations.”

Southwood acted throughout on the principle that the least possible measures should be taken, within the bounds of what might appear reasonable. MAFF banned the use of ruminant feed (feed pellets made from the ground-up carcasses of sheep and cows) for cattle and sheep, but did not ban its use for pigs and poultry. This omission was welcomed by the beef industry, which needed an outlet for the huge amounts of meat and bone meal which it could no longer sell as feed for cattle and sheep.

Without any evidence whatsoever, the Southwood report assured the public, “It is likely that cattle will prove to be a ‘dead-end host’ and most unlikely that BSE will have any implications for human health.”

When asked at the inquiry whether MAFF ever considered the possible danger from infected cattle which had not yet shown clinical signs of disease, Southwood said they had, “but it meant that the whole national herd would have to be destroyed,” so the issue was dropped.

The Southwood committee claimed that by 1996 the incidence of BSE would be very low and would subsequently disappear. In attempting to explain the failure of BSE to die out, Southwood places the blame on farmers, claiming they continued to use infected cattle feed. He insists that the number of infected animals is declining and the problem will soon go away.

The evidence presented to the inquiry by Professor Richard Lacey, a microbiologist from Leeds, refuted this claim. He insists that BSE is now endemic to the UK cattle herd, a fact that is concealed by the government’s policy of culling all beef cattle at 30 months, before the onset of BSE symptoms.

Professor Lacey told the inquiry he had video evidence that farmers were carrying out unsanctioned burials of infected carcasses “on a massive scale,” in order to win “BSE-free” accreditation for their herds. He warned that the uncontrolled dumping of carcasses might be to blame for the recent spate of E coli food poisoning outbreaks, which have claimed several lives.

E coli, salmonella and BSE might be spread from shallow cattle graves by birds and small animals, or enter the water system through streams, he said. He called for legislation to ban do-it-yourself burials.

Professor Lacey was one of the first scientists to raise the spectre of a “human mad cow disease” and was the first to publicly advocate the mass slaughter of infected herds. He told the inquiry that effective measures to deal with BSE were delayed by several years by government

ministers and scientists who sought to reassure the public that beef was safe, rather than face up to the magnitude of the problem. He said the House of Commons Agriculture Committee had attempted to portray him as “deranged” in 1990 when he warned of the dangers of CJD infection through the consumption of infected beef.

Commenting on the actions of government over the past 13 years, Lacey said, “The main thrust of the controls has been cosmetic, to appear to be taking action to restore public confidence.... The science was being manipulated to apply to what was politically convenient. Even if the problem of contaminated feed is solved, BSE can be passed on from cow to calf or through the infection of pasture land.”

He warned that the full death toll from Human BSE may not be known for decades, as its incubation period could be as long as 50 years.

The following day an emphatic denial of Lacey’s claims by Labour’s agriculture minister, Jack Cunningham, was broadcast on BBC One’s “Question Time.” Unfortunately for Cunningham, Channel Four News had earlier that evening broadcast the video footage of cow burials referred to by Lacey.

The inquiry is due to last for 18 months and is restricted to the period before March 20, 1996, when the link between BSE and new variant CJD was established. The chairman has stressed that no organisation or individual will be blamed for the crisis. But every day full transcripts are being placed on the internet. This is the first time that the proceedings of such a body have been accessible all over the world, which will make it more difficult for the truth to be covered up.



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