

BSE detected in beef passed for human consumption

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Concrete proof has emerged that meat from animals infected with 'Mad Cow Disease', or BSE, is going undetected onto supermarket shelves, thus exposing the human population to an incurable disease that has already caused the deaths of at least 29 people. A number of scientists have warned for over a decade that besides those cows showing obvious signs of BSE, there would be a larger number suffering from the disease but not yet showing visible symptoms. These warnings have now been belatedly confirmed.

As a result of a test for BSE undergoing trials in Switzerland, a cow suffering from the disease has been identified, which would otherwise have been sold as healthy meat. Switzerland is the first country to develop and use a test for BSE that is rapid enough to provide results in time to stop unhealthy animals from going into the food chain. A total of 3,000 randomly selected cows were tested using the fast technique developed by Prionics, a Zurich-based company. The results of this preliminary test were then confirmed using a slower, more widely used method. In all cases the results of the new, faster method and the slower method were the same. While the cows tested were all over 30 months old, this was not because the disease is absent in the younger animals. 'We would have needed a very large sample size to have detected infection in younger cows,' said Markus Moser of Prionics, 'But cows 20 months old have developed BSE in Britain.'

Although the sample size is too small for any accurate conclusions to be drawn, the test implies a rate of infection of 4.5 cows suffering from BSE per 1,000 amongst those cows processed for human consumption. The total number of BSE-infected cows identified in Switzerland is in the hundreds, as against hundreds of thousands in Britain.

New Scientist said in its October 17 editorial

headlined, 'Here's the beef: we shouldn't have to wait until we've eaten it to find out whether it's safe':

'It is scandalous that it has taken until now to test healthy cattle at the abattoir ... it is beyond belief that this has still not been done in Britain, home of the disease.' A member of a government committee on BSE, Roy Anderson, is quoted estimating that between 200 and 300 cows incubating BSE are entering the food chain each year. He did not call for the immediate introduction of the Swiss method of testing at British abattoirs, but said, 'If it is not too expensive and reliable, testing at abattoirs would make sense.' The British authorities, *New Scientist* reports, have decided testing is not warranted.

This response will not be surprising to those who have followed the official inquiry into BSE currently being held in Brixton, London. The investigation has been limited to events occurring before the present Labour government came to power, implying that the problem has now been solved. It has also been made clear that none of those responsible for the outbreak, spread and human consumption of BSE-infected meat will be held responsible for their actions. This is why those government advisors who have been called upon to testify have felt free to admit that essential facts about BSE were kept from the public, and that maintaining confidence in the beef industry was given a higher priority than protecting human health.

These latest events add further weight to the findings of the Workers Inquiry into Human BSE held last year by the Socialist Equality Party in Britain. The findings noted, 'The choice of the 30 month figure [for the slaughtering of cattle] was made on commercial grounds because beef cattle are normally slaughtered below that age anyway. Cattle below that age could be infected and be spreading the disease but are unlikely to

show the symptoms.'

See Also:

Human BSE/CJD--Anatomy of a Health Disaster: New book on BSE widely praised

[27 March 1998]

Copies of *Human BSE/CJD--Anatomy of a Health Disaster* can be ordered from Mehring Books: PO Box 1306, Sheffield, S93UW, United Kingdom. The price of the book is £5.99, plus £2 shipping and handling (US\$ 9.95 plus \$3.50 shipping and handling).

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