Risk of Mad Cow Disease growing throughout Europe

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A single cow infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or Mad Cow Disease, could expose up to 400,000 people to the risk of infection according to the European Union's Scientific Steering Committee (SSC). This is the worst case scenario presented in the Committee's report *Human Exposure Risk via Food with respect to BSE*.

Because ground meat used for pasta, pies and sausages is generally made in batches of 5 to 7 tonnes, it is possible for hundreds of thousands of people to eat the BSE agent from one cow. The amount of agent that causes infectivity in humans and results in the human form of BSE-variant Creutzfeld-Jakob Disease (vCJD) is unknown.

Figures from the organisation that monitors animal disease, the Office International des Epizooites, show increasing numbers of BSE cases in Europe (excluding the UK). Italy reported 22 cases for the first time in 1999 and the Netherlands reported 65—up from two in 1998. There is a steady decline reported in the UK, from a peak of 3,500 cases a month in 1992-93 to 150 at present.

Cases of vCJD are also increasing. So far 48 people have died in the UK of vCJD and scientists say there are 10 more people suspected of having the disease. There has been one case in Ireland and the authorities have confirmed a third case in France.

The SSC say that even in European countries that claim to be BSE-free, some infected animals are still entering the food chain. In any case their populations are at risk because trade in cattle and food containing cattle material is so widespread. The methods to prevent BSE from spreading are “far from being satisfactory,” they add.

The SSC concludes its report with a call for a ban on all infected animals in food and if that is not possible to ban high-risk tissue such as brain and spinal cord. Action has been slow and patchy since the disease was first recognised in 1986. Only seven member states—France, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK—have legislation banning the use of high-risk tissue. Even then passing of legislation is no guarantee that it is enforced. In France many people eat amourette containing brain and spinal cord and andouillette made from intestines of young calves (the most infective organ at that age).

In 1998 the European Court criticised the European Commission's handling of the BSE crisis. The Commission had not enforced legislation and agreements relating to animal identification, use of ruminant animal feed containing mammalian tissue (MBM) and the ban on British beef exports. The UK government continued to export MBM after it had banned it at home in 1988 and the EU only banned its use in June 1994. From 1996 governments had access to EU money to buy up exported UK calves. Despite this, the Belgian government sold 20,000 cattle of UK origin for human consumption. The first animals with BSE in Belgium and Luxembourg in 1997 were made into MBM and exported.

The European Court complained of under-reporting of BSE cases. Of the cattle exported from the UK between 1985 and 1989, scientists predicted there should be 1,600 cases of BSE. However, only 400 cases were reported, many of which were not British cattle.

Professor Jeanne Brugère-Picoux, of the French food safety agency (AFSSA), says that the number of BSE cases in France is far higher than the 75 reported so far. She claimed that the French policy of slaughtering a whole herd if there is a case of BSE scares off French farmers. “The first inkling they have that something is not right, off goes the animal to the abattoir. It then enters the food chain,” she added.

As the problems grow in mainland Europe, the claim by the Blair Labour government that “British beef is the safest in the world” might seem to be true. In the UK, beside the ban on MBM feed, high risk material and exports there is also a ban on meat from cattle over 30

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months old. This is because the incubation period of the disease is typically four to five years. However about 2 percent of the 175,000 BSE cases identified have been in cattle under 30 months. A great many more cattle will have the disease, but not show the symptoms.

The 30-month ban is also being broken, according to a report in the *Sunday Times*. Graham Bell, an official at the UK Intervention Board, said, “It has not been monitored properly and not nearly enough has been done to stop dishonest practices.” Farmers and cattle dealers have altered identity documents to conceal the ages of cattle and 90,000 cattle have disappeared from the registers. “There is a hard core of people who are trying to get animals over 30 months into the human food chain,” said Nigel Durnford, an animal health inspector.

Recently Agriculture Minister Nick Brown appeared before the Parliamentary Select Committee on Agriculture. He said his aim was to be “a good governmental sponsor for the [agricultural] sector”. About beef he said, “our objective is to sell the product”. The committee itself complained that “steps taken for public health might have an adverse impact on competitiveness,” adding that the beef bans had given “assistance to competitors”. Its main recommendation was to tell the government it needed “a strategy to enhance long-term competitiveness”.

By making beating the competition the driving force of policymaking, and not the satisfaction of human needs, the main lesson of the BSE crisis is being lost. The Labour government is responsible for sowing the seeds of future disasters.

On a European level, the future for containing the BSE and vCJD problem is not much better. Only three countries responded to the request by the SSC for information on the uses of bovine materials and even these replied in “rather global and qualitative terms”.

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