

Renewed fears that BSE/Mad Cow Disease can pass from one generation to another

Barry Mason
12 July 2000

Britain's Agricultural Minister confirmed in parliament last month that a calf had been born with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) or Mad Cow Disease. The animal was born after August 1, 1996, when extra control measures on animal feed containing mammalian meat and bone meal had been implemented, supposed to eradicate the incidence of BSE.

BSE is a degenerative brain disease in cattle, first recognised in the mid-1980s, caused by the infectious prion protein. The disease is thought to have resulted from the practice of feeding ruminant animals with the treated remains of slaughtered animals. It is responsible for the development of a new variant (vCJD) of the fatal brain-wasting disorder Creutzfeldt Jacob Disease.

Despite the potentially grave dangers posed to public health by his confirmation, Agriculture Minister Nick Brown went on to claim that “there is no risk to food safety as a result of this case”. The newly-established Food Standards Agency (FSA) would also be issuing a statement to that effect later in the day, Brown said, adding that the FSA chairman had also stated that there was “no extra risk to food safety” posed by the recent case.

Brown's announcement continues a long-running cover-up over BSE and its impact on the human population, dating back to the Conservative administration of Margaret Thatcher. Ever since the emergence of BSE and its human equivalent, the main issue for successive British governments has been to protect the profits of the beef industry.

To this end, scientists like Professor Richard Lacey, who had warned of the dangers of eating BSE-contaminated beef and called for the destruction of England's national herd, were subjected to a campaign of vilification. BSE first became a notifiable disease in

cattle in 1988 and in July of that year the ban on mammalian meat and bone meal was brought in. In 1992, nearly 37,000 cases of BSE were recorded in the UK, yet still the Conservative government denied any danger to human health.

Certain limited measures were introduced which undermined this claim, including a ban on the use of specified bovine offals in the human food chain. Later, the “30-month rule” was introduced, preventing the use of cattle over 30 months in human food. Even so, the regulations were ineffective and poorly enforced. The 30-month rule moreover meant that animals with the disease but not yet showing symptoms might still be entering the food chain.

Only when a number of young people began to exhibit symptoms similar to those of CJD normally found in older people, and several died as a result, was it accepted that BSE had passed into the human food chain with fatal consequences. The number of fatalities has increased steadily, and to date a total of 58 mainly young people have died of the disease in the UK. The Edinburgh-based CJD surveillance unit says that another 12 cases have been identified. Many scientists have warned that the death toll might still not have peaked and that the final figure could be in the thousands.

When the Labour government came to power in May 1997 they had to tackle the widespread public concern in Britain and internationally that had caused a collapse in the British beef industry. To this end, Blair convened a public inquiry into BSE under Lord Justice Phillips. The inquiry has yet to report. However, Labour had stipulated that the inquiry would only consider matters up to March 1996, when the link between BSE and vCJD was first officially recognised, and that subsequent developments—including continued fears of

the danger to public health—would not be examined.

The Blair government also announced the establishment of the FSA—a new agency supposedly answerable to the consumer and aimed at restoring public confidence in the food industry.

Brown's statement in parliament effectively exposed the FSA's role as a rubber stamp for the government and food industry. It also confirms that Labour intends to continue defending the agricultural industry at the expense of public health.

The Agriculture Minister gave two possible explanations for the occurrence: either the calf had caught the disease through maternal transmission, he said, or it had been fed contaminated cattle feed. The government had extended the ban on mammalian meat and bone meal in August 1996, making it illegal to hold supplies of it on farms or in feed mills.

In his statement, however, Brown also described maternal transmission as being only a “theoretical” possibility, despite well-documented evidence that scrapie, a prion disease found in sheep similar to BSE, can be passed from mother to offspring.

More troubling, in March this year it was announced that a 24-year-old woman with vCJD had given birth to a baby girl at the end of 1999. The mother died in May this year and her daughter has exhibited symptoms similar to people with vCJD.

Although declining in numbers, there continue to be instances of BSE in cattle, with 3,178 notified cases in 1998 and 2,254 in 1999. Maternal transmission in cows would mean that the disease could be endemic in the cattle population, even if at a low level.

Professor John Collinge, an expert on CJD at the Medical Research Council in London, was quoted in a *Sunday Times* article saying, “It was something that was always on the cards. In sheep scrapie, a similar prion disease, the disease passes from ewes to their lambs. There is good evidence that in cattle about one in 10 infected animals transmit the disease to a calf. The prion that causes BSE is identical to the one found in humans with vCJD, so it is logical that there would be a risk of vCJD jumping from mothers to children.”



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