

Britain: Deaths from Human BSE reveal "statistically significant rising trend"

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Two more deaths in the last fortnight have brought to 69 the total number of fatalities in the UK from variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (vCJD). So far this year 14 people have died from this brain-wasting disorder related to BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) or Mad Cow disease, equalling the 1999 total. Another seven are known to be currently suffering from this incurable disease, also known as Human BSE.

Government scientists warned Monday that there was a "statistically significant rising trend" in the number of vCJD victims. The government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), set up in the wake of the emergence of BSE during the mid-1980s, put the increase at between 20 and 30 percent a year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of relatives of Human BSE victims. Gerard Callaghan's brother Maurice died of the disease in November 1995. He said the rising trend was "very worrying. It is something that as a group of families has concerned us greatly."

The Labour government has earmarked just £26 million for research into CJD and BSE, a fraction of the amount that has been paid to farmers in compensation for cattle that were culled. In March, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that over £200 million in further assistance would be paid to UK farmers. This comes on top of over £270 million in compensation paid to farmers in 1998 and 1999 alone.

Asked what he thought of the measures that had been introduced since Labour came to power in 1997, Gerhard Callaghan said, "I have little or no confidence in them. The fact is that we still have widespread abuses. An Irish farmer was recently prosecuted for deliberately importing an BSE-infected animal to get government compensation. The system is really open to

abuse."

John Middleton, whose son Mathew Parker died of Human BSE in March 1997 at the age of 19, said he thought the government was still playing down the true level of the disease. "They don't want to damage the beef industry. It seems to me that animals are better thought of than humans. They are spending all that money on compensation to farmers and nothing for the families of victims of Human BSE. Personally, I would rather have my son back, but it's the principle of the thing."

Frances Hall of the Human BSE Foundation, whose son Peter was among the first victims of the disease, said, "It has been apparent to us for some time now that the numbers were going up. I run a help line and it has been obvious from the number of calls that the figures were increasing." She said that support and care provisions for victims and their families were "very patchy really. In some areas it's like a postcode lottery, things just aren't available when they're needed. The illness progresses very quickly; there just isn't time to wait around. We have been asking the government for months for a centralised care package, so that victims have consistent support."

Following the recent announcement of a "cluster" of five vCJD cases around the Leicestershire village of Queniborough, a SEAC statement said it was "unlikely to have occurred by chance," but added that "this cannot be completely ruled out".

Like the majority of Human BSE victims, those who died in Queniborough (population 2,297) in 1998 were young people, and included teenage mother Stacey Robinson, 19. Van driver Glen Day, 35, and 24-year-old finance administrator Pamela Bayless both succumbed to the disease in the same month. Ms. Bayless's father said, "When Glen, Stacey and Pam all

died within months of each other, I spoke to Glen's dad and we discussed how strange it was that it was all in Queniborough. It's such a rare disease."

A 19-year-old man from the area died in June this year, and a 25-year-old presently being nursed at home is another probable victim.

Dr. Robert Will, director of the government's CJD Surveillance Unit, said, "Statistical evidence of a cluster might be of importance in identifying further information on the causes of vCJD. But I am a bit cautious about it. We have previously identified clusters which in the end turned out not to be significant. That is the problem with rare phenomena—I am still not sure we will find anything definite from this statistical anomaly."

Unlike conventional CJD, which is most frequent in those over the age of 60 and is very rare in those below 50, vCJD has mainly affected young people. To account for the high incidence in this age group, Dr. Will said that meat processing methods in the 1980s might have led to contaminated meat ending up on children's plates. "One possible explanation for the age distribution is that young people tend to eat these products more than the adult population," he commented.

In an effort to boost profits, the beef industry introduced a process known as "mechanically recovered meat." This method employs high-pressure hoses to obtain small amounts of tissue from animal carcasses. Despite the fact that mechanically recovered meat could have contained the remnants of the spinal cord, where BSE infectivity was known to be concentrated, the process was only outlawed in 1995. The recovered meat scraps largely ended up in cheap pies, sausages, burgers and ready-cooked meals. Such products were mainly bought by those on low incomes, but could also be found in school meals and infant foods.

However, not all scientists agree. Dr. Philip Monk, consultant in communicable diseases for Leicestershire Health Authority, stated, "baby food and school dinners" were not a factor in the Queniborough cluster. Initial attention would be focused on the movement of cattle into the county. Local abattoirs and meat processing plants will also be investigated to establish if their products were sold regularly in local outlets. "We have been looking into what patterns of

slaughtering took place in this area of Leicestershire and where meat from these slaughters entered the food chain," Dr. Monk said.

Over 10,000 tonsils and appendixes removed in hospital operations carried out in Leicestershire since 1985 may be tested for signs of CJD as part of a national survey prompted by the Queniborough cluster. CJD is known to incubate in these tissues in the early stages of the disease, however tests on tonsils and appendixes carried out elsewhere in the UK have so far failed to uncover signs of the disease.

There are indications that BSE also may have spread to other animals, including sheep. After three flocks of sheep imported into the US from Europe displayed signs of fatal brain disease, the sheep are to be destroyed. It is not yet known if the animals had contracted a form of BSE, or a novel strain of scrapie, which has existed in sheep for centuries.

The Food Standards Agency released a report Tuesday warning that present safety measures were not tight enough to prevent "high risk" material from sheep possibly containing a BSE agent from entering the human food chain. According to the report, evidence that BSE has entered the national flock "might emerge at any time in the next year or two."

The number of eventual victims of Human BSE is still an unknown. Epidemiologist Roy Anderson said that the total number of vCJD cases this year "was likely to be greater than any previous year, so this epidemic is just starting. It may be a small epidemic, and all of us hope it will be, but this disease has such a long incubation period, where exposure was probably in the late 1980s, that it's far too early to say whether it will be small, medium or large."

The Human BSE Foundation can be found at: <http://www.hbsef.org>



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