

Britain: Labour government accused of cover-up over BSE experiments

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Farming and Environment Secretary Margaret Beckett has been accused of seeking to suppress how vital experiments concerning the safety of British lamb and mutton were botched-up. Scientists had hoped to determine whether deadly Mad Cow Disease (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or BSE) has infected British sheep.

Most scientific opinion accepts that eating beef infected with BSE causes the fatal and incurable brain wasting disorder variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) in humans. There are 107 confirmed or probable cases of vCJD in the UK. The total number of cases could be between several hundred and 150,000.

Four years ago scientists at the Institute of Animal Health (IAH) were commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) to check brains thought to have come from sheep that had died of scrapie in 1990-92 at the height of the BSE epidemic. Scrapie is a disease similar to BSE that has been known for centuries but does not appear to affect human health. Since the early 1990s, scientists have become increasingly concerned that sheep diagnosed with scrapie may actually have BSE. By examining the brains, the IAH scientists hoped to find out if this was the case.

In December of last year, however, Professor Chris Bostock, the director of the Institute of Animal Health, became concerned that the sheep brains had been contaminated with cow tissue. The *Guardian* newspaper also reports that senior agriculture officials knew in early summer that there had been contamination, ruining the experiments. None of this was made public until early last month, when the government's BSE advisory committee hinted at a problem and suggested that all the brains used in the experiment should be retested using another method.

On September 28, the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra), which replaced the largely discredited MAFF, published the government's substantive response to the report issued by the official BSE Inquiry in October 2000. Presenting this response, Defra Parliamentary Undersecretary Eric Morley claimed, "The culture of secrecy and protection of the food industry criticised in the [BSE Inquiry] report had disappeared." Media attention focused on the £120,000 compensation payments paid to the families of current vCJD sufferers. Little attention was paid to the two pages covering BSE in sheep and the government's *Contingency Plan for the emergence of naturally occurring BSE in Sheep in the United Kingdom National Flock*. In section 2.12 of the *Response* are the words, "Currently BSE is not known to have occurred naturally in sheep. However, a scientific experiment is underway to test whether sheep infected with scrapie during the 1990s actually had BSE. Scientists are examining brain tissues collected from sheep killed at that time. The experiment is not yet complete, but preliminary results could be compatible with BSE having been in sheep at that time. However, scientific experts advising the Food Standards Agency have said it is not yet possible to draw conclusions from the research. The reasons for this are the research is still incomplete; and there is a risk the sheep brain tissue being tested may have been contaminated with BSE-infected cow brains."

Elsewhere the government's *Response to the BSE Inquiry* says, "Ministers are fully involved in the decision-making process and are consulted on (or participate in) all important decisions. Ministers have also made clear that they expect decisions with public health implications to be referred to them in a timely

manner."

Last week it was revealed that the brains had not just been *contaminated* by cow tissue. The scientists had, in fact, been using brains from *cows* and not sheep. This information prompted Beckett to issue a late night press release on Wednesday October 17, saying the tests had been ruined through "contamination" but avoiding any mention of the word "cow".

The following day, Professor Roy Anderson, head of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at London University who sits on the government's BSE advisory committee, revealed the full story. Scientists had been experimenting on cows' brains by mistake. The experiments, Anderson continued, have been "a great waste of time and effort and deeply misleading". He also blamed government for relying too much on the results from these tests and not carrying out other investigations and research. He suggested thousands more sheep should have been tested each year before they were sent for human consumption.

On Saturday October 20, Beckett was asked on BBC radio why the government had not tested the thousands of sheep that Anderson thought necessary. She replied, "Well, I'm in the same position as you are, and indeed Professor Anderson at this moment. I don't know the answer to that question either." She defended herself by saying, "I first found out about the experiment that had gone wrong on Wednesday afternoon."

By Monday October 22, Beckett was forced to make a statement to parliament, which included the incredible admission, "We have known *since the experiments began* that there were some doubts about whether the brains ... were cross-contaminated" [Emphasis added]. She also revealed, if even this can be believed given the penchant demonstrated by government bodies for using the wrong species in experiments, that only 180 sheep have ever been tested for BSE. The experiments, "have reached the point at which, if any of these scrapie cases was BSE, this might have become evident. It has not done so. However, it is too soon to draw firm conclusions from these ongoing experiments that can last several years."

If the experiments had shown that sheep had died from BSE and not scrapie, the consequences for human health and the farming industry could be far worse than the BSE crisis in cattle.

Recent experiments show that although BSE is

largely confined to the brain and spinal cord in cattle, it spreads into far more organs and tissues in sheep, including meat/muscle. The current ban on the use of the brain and spinal cord from sheep and cattle would be insufficient protection. Officials from Defra say that if BSE had been found in these experiments then almost the entire 40 million sheep flock would have to be slaughtered. This would bring further devastation to an industry that has been decimated by BSE in cattle and more recently Foot and Mouth Disease.

The government has abandoned the Institute of Animal Health experiments. If the experiments were known to be flawed from the start, as Beckett now reveals, the fact the government did not pour millions into alternative research is criminal. There has been virtually no testing of sheep and there is still no suitable test procedure to establish BSE in a live animal, years after the need for one was first identified. The government actually insisted on a special exemption from European Union rules requiring the compulsory testing of meat used for human consumption. The words "open government", "the open sharing of information and research on all topics", "joined-up government" and "the precautionary principle" that litter the *Response to the BSE Inquiry* are a mockery. Nearly 15 years after BSE was first identified in cattle, we are no nearer knowing if sheep are similarly affected or what the risk to human health is.

See Also:

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