

Press release

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20 March 1996

CJD AND PUBLIC HEALTH - STEPHEN DORRELL STATEMENT

Stephen Dorrell, Secretary of State for Health today made the following statement to the House of Commons:

"With permission, Madam Speaker, I would like to make a Statement about the latest advice which the Government has received from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. The House will be aware that this Committee which is chaired by Professor John Pattison was established in 1990 to bring together leading experts in neurology, epidemiology and microbiology to provide scientifically based advice on the implications for animal and human health of different forms of spongiform encephalopathy.

"The Committee provides independent advice to Government. Its members are not Government scientists; they are leading practitioners in their field and the purpose of the Committee is to provide advice not simply to Government, but to the whole community on the scientific questions which arise in its field. The Government has always made it clear that is our policy to base our decisions on the scientific advice provided by the advisory committee. The Committee has today agreed new advice about the implications for animal and human health of the latest scientific evidence. Copies of the Committee's advice, together with a statement from the Chief Medical Officer which is based on that advice, have been placed in the Vote Office.

"The Committee has considered the work being done by the Government Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh which specialises in Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. This work, which relates to the 10 cases of CJD which have been identified in people aged under 42, has led the Committee to conclude that the unit has identified a previously unrecognised and consistent disease pattern. A review of patients' medical histories, genetic analysis, and consideration of other possible causes have failed to explain these cases adequately. There remains no scientific proof that BSE can be transmitted to man by beef, but the Committee have concluded that the most likely explanation at present is that these cases are linked to exposure to BSE before the introduction of the specified bovine offal ban in 1989. Against the background of this new finding the Committee has today agreed the series of recommendations which the Government is making public this afternoon.

[more]

STATEMENT BY SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee have considered 10 cases of CJD which have occurred in people aged under 42 which have recently been identified by the CJD Surveillance Unit, Edinburgh. The Committee have concluded that the Unit has identified a previously unrecognised and consistent disease pattern. A review of patients' medical histories, genetic analysis to date and consideration of other possible causes, such as increased ascertainment, have failed to explain these cases adequately. Although there is no direct evidence of a link, on current data and in the absence of any credible alternative the most likely explanation at present is that these cases are linked to exposure to BSE before the introduction of the SBO ban in 1989. This is cause for great concern.

CJD remains a rare disease and it is too early to predict how many further cases, if any, there will be of this new form. Continued surveillance is of the utmost importance and the Committee are actively seeking further data from both the UK and abroad to help assess the full significance of the Unit's findings.

The Committee emphasised it is imperative that current measures to protect the public health are properly enforced and recommend constant supervision to ensure the complete removal of spinal cord.

The Committee also recommend:

- a. that carcasses from cattle aged over 30 months must be deboned in licensed plants supervised by the Meat Hygiene Service and the trimmings must be classified as SBOs.
- b. a prohibition on the use of mammalian meat and bonemeal in feed for all farm animals.
- c. that HSE and ACDP, in consultation with SEAC should urgently review their advice in the light of these findings.
- d. that the Committee urgently consider what further research is necessary.

The Committee does not consider that these findings lead it to revise its advice on the safety of milk.

If the recommendations set out above are carried out the Committee concluded that the risk from eating beef is now likely to be extremely small.

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This is not part of the statement but is for information of EHDs

ACDP - Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens
SBOs - Specified Bovine Offals

"The Committee's recommendations fall into two parts.

"Firstly, they recommend a series of measures to further reduce the risk to human and animal health associated with BSE. My Rt Hon Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will be making a statement about those measures which fall within his Department's responsibilities immediately after questions on this Statement have been concluded.

"In addition the Committee recommended that there should be urgent consideration of what further research is needed in this area and that the Health and Safety Executive and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens should urgently review their advice. The Government intends to accept all the recommendations of the Advisory Committee in full; they will be put into effect as soon as possible.

"The second group of recommendations from the Committee offers advice about food safety on the assumption that the further measures recommended by the Committee are implemented. On that basis the Committee has concluded that the risk from eating beef is now likely to be extremely small and there is no need for it to revise its advice on the safety of milk.

"The Chief Medical Officer will be writing today to all doctors to ensure that the latest scientific evidence is drawn to their attention. In the statement by the Chief Medical Officer which we have placed in the Vote Office, Sir Kenneth Calman poses to himself the question whether he will continue to eat beef. I quote his answer. "I will do so as part of a varied and balanced diet. The new measures and effective enforcement of existing measures will continue to ensure that the likely risk of developing CJD is extremely small."

"A particular question has arisen about the possibility that children are more at risk of contracting CJD. There is at present no evidence for age sensitivity and the scientific evidence for the risks of developing CJD in those eating meat in childhood has not changed as a result of these new findings. However, parents will be concerned about implications for their children and I have asked the Advisory Committee to provide specific advice on this issue following its next meeting.

"Any further measures that the Committee recommend will be given the most urgent consideration. As the Government has repeatedly made clear, new scientific evidence will be communicated to the public as soon as it becomes available."

Notes to Editors

1. The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) reviews the evidence, including the science and details of individual CJD cases.
2. The National CJD Surveillance Unit was established at Western General Hospital in Edinburgh in May 1990 under the direction of Dr R Will. It is funded jointly by the Department of Health and Scottish Office.

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