
SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SUMMARY OF SEAC MEETING, 15 JUNE 1998

The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) met on 15 June at the offices of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Tolworth.

The Committee conducted its regular review of research findings and the epidemiological information on BSE and CJD.

The number of cases of BSE continues to decline and was down a further 20% from the equivalent period last year.

The total number of definite and probable nvCJD cases in the UK was 26.

The Committee reviewed the latest research and assessments of possible risks on human blood and blood products. SEAC presented their advice to Ministers on 17 June 1998. A copy is attached.

Members noted a number of procedural improvements to the operation of the Committee and considered future proposals for putting more information in the public domain.

The Committee reviewed a proposal for research into the possibility that a hitherto unrecognised strain of BSE could exist in a sub-clinical form, i.e. cattle could be infected with BSE without ever showing clinical signs of the disease. They considered a number of methods of detecting a sub-clinical strain of BSE and the difficulty of distinguishing such an infection from pre-clinical BSE ie. BSE that had not reached the stage at which clinical signs of disease were apparent. SEAC concluded that this area of research should be given high priority but noted that further refinements to the diagnostic tests and to the design of the possible studies were necessary.

Chairman: Professor Sir John Pattison MA, DM, FRCPath
Joint Secretariat

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nvCJD AND LEUCODEPLETION - ADVICE TO GOVERNMENT

SEAC previously provided advice to Government in October 1997 on human blood and blood products. The Committee notes the subsequent action taken by Government on blood products on the recommendation of the Committee on Safety of Medicines (February 1998). At its meeting on 15 June 1998 SEAC reviewed the latest research and assessments of possible risks and noted there is considerable uncertainty about whether or not the infectious agent may be present in human blood and, if present, to what extent it would represent any risk of transmission. However, if there were to be any infectious agent present in human blood then the Committee considered that it would most likely be in lymphocytes (one type of white cell).

The Committee agreed that leucodepletion (removal of the white cells) could be one way of reducing any risk that there may be. The precise impact of leucodepletion on reducing the theoretical risk of transmission of nvCJD is difficult to assess and varies depending on the assumptions made, for example about the level of infectivity present in the blood of an infected individual and the number of nvCJD cases over the coming years. However, the Committee agreed that there were a number of plausible scenarios under which leucodepletion could have a significant effect but equally there were others where it could have little effect.

Recommendations

On balance the Committee recommends that the Government should extend the use of leucodepletion for all blood destined for transfusion as soon as practically possible. Care should be taken that this does not impact adversely on the donation and supply of blood.

The Committee recommends that a review of relevant areas of research is carried out with a view to identifying areas where further research may resolve uncertainties. It also recommends that additional research is carried out to identify the most efficient of the methods for leucodepletion. It is recognised that it will be many years before some of the results will be available.

The Committee stresses that advice on such action was being recommended on a precautionary basis given the absence of a protective species barrier in human to human transfer. The Committee sees no reason to revise the advice it has already given on the safety of beef and bovine products.

SEAC - June 1998

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CJD/20

I regret to say that in their haste to get the press release issued our Press Office forgot to attach the Public Summary to the electronic version!

They will take steps to make sure that it is provide with the hard copies. In the meantime I have added to these copies of the Press Release the Public Summary and Advice to Ministers.

17/7/98