

NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN LORD PRIVY SEAL, LORD PEYTON AND
PROFESSOR JOHN COLLINGE - 20 NOVEMBER 1996

SUMMARY OF PROF. COLLINGE'S VIEWS

- present measures for controlling BSE are sufficient, provided they are properly policed;
- there is still the prospect of an epidemic of CJD based on the consumption of infected beef up to 1989 when the control measures became effective;
- while we do not know the incubation period, an educated guess is 30 years; we therefore have a window of opportunity to prepare therapeutics before an epidemic;
- to delay research until we are sure about an epidemic will mean we are too late - the problem is soluble, and the money required to fund research is not large compared with the cost of the cull;
- many members of SEAC are complacent about the low risk of an epidemic; Professor Collinge (and some other newer members) feel this is misplaced;
- a further cull of cattle (the "selective cull") is not justified - it has little scientific bases and is most unlikely to lift the export ban;
- it seems very likely that other countries (notably France) have a higher incidence of BSE than they admit.

DETAIL

The Lord Privy Seal met John Collinge at Lord Peyton's request. Professor Collinge holds a personal chair in Molecular Neurogenetics at Imperial College; he is a member of the UK Government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, and deputy chairman of the European Commission High Level Group on BSE.

Professor Collinge started by saying that his views on BSE (shared by some other recently appointed members) were rather more radical than those of the older members of SEAC, who tended to take the view that everything will be OK.

Professor Collinge does not think an epidemic (of the new variant CJD) can be ruled out. The evidence is gradually accumulating to suggest that CJD is due to BSE, and he thinks we could be looking at a serious problem at some point in the future.

He agreed that the measures now in place were adequate to prevent further spread of the disease, provided they are adequately policed; initially this was not the case, although now the evidence available to SEAC suggests policing is now firm enough.

Therefore if there is an epidemic of CJD, it will stem from beef consumption up to about 1989. There is no suggestion that transmission can occur from human to human, so this will not be a factor in prolonging any epidemic. (This evidence comes from the studies on cannibalism in Papua and New Guinea).

However big the threat may be, it will be from past consumption. However, we do not know the incubation period. We do not know whether the recent cases represent the peak or the beginning of an epidemic (which would be expected to have a bell-shaped incidence graph). To assume it is the peak is rather complacent; this would imply a mean incubation period of only 5 years, and imply there was virtually no species barrier; it is therefore most unlikely. As an educated guess, Professor Collinge thought the mean incubation period might be around 30 years. An epidemic is therefore some time in the future, and we should be thinking about how to deal with that, and most notably, how to develop therapeutics.

He is beginning to collaborate with Glaxo, in parallel with discussions with the Medical Research Council, but there is at the moment little financial incentive for private sector companies to invest in this. However, there may be more incentive in developing diagnostics, and work on this was developing (with some success, since the recent discovery of a diagnostic marker).

Professor Collinge made the point that development of therapeutics may therefore need some encouragement from Government. He admitted that we could not be sure they were needed, we were still not certain about an epidemic happening. However, if we waited until confirmation of an epidemic, it would be too late. In any event, money invested in such research would not be waited even if fears of an epidemic proved to be a false alarm; we would in the process learn much about degenerative brain diseases generally (such as Alzheimers). He also pointed out that the sums of money involved were not large in comparison to the amounts being expended on the cull of cattle.

On the subject of the cull, Professor Collinge agreed that extending the cull would be a waste of time, for all the reasons he had already given. He was concerned about the Florence agreement and any faith being put in the suggestion that the ban would be lifted. He feels there is very little chance of the ban being lifted; even if Brussels lift the ban, feelings are running so high in other countries that they would impose their own ban. Interestingly, he pointed to how in France scientists are extremely cautious in the opinions they advance (they can go to jail for giving the wrong advice). Against this background, they would be unlikely to advise lifting the export ban.

Any cull in the UK therefore has to be for reasons other than for ensuring the lifting of the export ban; but since there is little

scientific reason for "selective" cull, it is difficult to justify at all. (He used the word "selective" with the qualification that he felt it was anything but selective to kill 10 healthy animals to ensure you killed one infected animal).

Professor Collinge suspected that many cases in France were not reported - the system set up there (under which autopsies on BSE cows must be paid for by the farmer if they are negative for BSE) provides no incentive for a farmer to report suspected cases. We know from the export figures that around 60,000 beasts would have been exported to France which could have been incubating BSE; one would have expected around 20,000 of these to have developed the disease. IN addition, considerable quantities of contaminated feed was exported to France over this period. In fact, 20 cases have been reported.

On the positive side, Professor Collinge reported that we now know more about CJD/BSE than about any other degenerative brain disease. This is a soluble problem, provided we put sufficient effort into it.

Professor Collinge said he would be content for the Lord Privy Seal to discuss this conversation with Cabinet Colleagues.