



NINETY SIXTH MEETING OF THE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee held its 96th meeting in London on 20th February 2007, and discussed the following:

CURRENT ISSUES

SEAC was informed about the following issues:

- The Clinical Governance Advisory Group is finalising its report, which will be published in due course.
- A fourth case of blood transfusion associated transmission of vCJD was recently announced by the Health Protection Agency (HPA).
- The United Kingdom (UK) Chief Medical Officers have sent a letter to neurologists to remind them to remain vigilant and refer unusual neurological cases through the established national arrangements for referral and reporting of suspect cases of human prion disease.
- In response to advice from SEAC and the Committee on Microbiological Safety of Blood Tissue and Organs, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has asked the European Commission to include vCJD diagnostic assays in Annex II List A of the In Vitro Medical Diagnostic Devices Directive 98/79/EC.
- The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has completed a review of the National Scrapie Plan Ram Genotyping Scheme (RGS). The SEAC Sheep Subgroup's recent consideration of the science underpinning

the NSP was part of this review¹. Ministers have accepted the key recommendation of the review that a fully funded RGS is no longer appropriate. A consultation will take place on options for the future of the RGS. Further information is available on the Defra website².

- Three incidents of failures of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) testing controls that have occurred since SEAC 95. Further information is available on the Food Standards Agency (FSA) website³.

BSE UPDATE

SEAC was updated by Defra on the annual number of BSE cases in cattle in UK since 1980 and data on BSE cases reported in other countries. In UK, the epidemic peaked in 1992, with over 37 000 confirmed cases and has since declined with 114 cases confirmed in 2006. The number of cases of BSE in cattle born in 1996 or later, as a proportion of the cattle population, is similar to levels found in other European countries. There have been 160 BSE cases in animals born after the introduction of the reinforced ban in 1996 confirmed in the UK, probably due to either low level residual contamination of feed bins on farms or imported feed. SEAC noted that this suggested very small amounts of contaminated feed could cause infection. This made it likely that the tail of the BSE epidemic could continue for a number of years. SEAC suggested that Defra consider ways to reduce residual contamination of feed bins and educate the users of feed bins and Defra responded that they had already taken steps to do so.

CONSIDERATION OF FUTURE DISCUSSION OF UNUSUAL CASES OF SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY IN CATTLE

SEAC considered the scope for a future discussion on unusual cases of BSE. In addition to consideration of published information, researchers will be invited to provide unpublished data

¹ <http://www.seac.gov.uk/statements/sheepsubgrp-statement131006.pdf>

² <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2007/070130b.htm>

³ <http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2007/jan/miscow>
<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2007/jan/untestedotm>
<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2006/dec/untestedotm>

and contribute to the discussions. Although the available information is likely to be limited, SEAC considered it important that the origins, detection, transmissibility, clinical and pathological phenotype and animal and public health implications of such cases be discussed and gaps in knowledge identified.

ATYPICAL SCRAPIE CASE AUDIT UPDATE

SEAC was updated on investigations of a case of atypical scrapie in a sheep flock considered free of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). An independent audit of the processes used to manage the flock has been completed and a final report would be presented at SEAC 97. SEAC noted the progress made by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency in tracing and testing samples from animals from the research flock, including those that had been supplied to other research facilities.

BSE IN SHEEP CONTINGENCY PLANNING

FSA asked SEAC to consider an analysis of the epidemiological implications should BSE be found in one or more UK sheep to aid in contingency planning.

SEAC generally agreed with the analysis and concluded that, although it is unlikely that BSE is present in the UK sheep flock, it is important to develop a contingency plan should it ever be found. However, given the hypothetical nature of the epidemic and the difficulties in tracing sheep movements precisely, it is only possible to take a pragmatic approach to decisions about risk minimisation and the additional surveillance required, if cases of BSE in sheep are found.

UPDATE ON PREVALENCE STUDIES

SEAC was updated about three approaches to obtain better estimates of the prevalence of subclinical vCJD in the UK population.

(i) Testing of samples under collection by the National Anonymous Tonsil archive is underway. It is anticipated that about 11 000 samples will be tested by May 2007. SEAC welcomed the progress being made.

(ii) A working group convened by the HPA, in response to a recommendation from SEAC⁴, had considered the feasibility of collecting tissues from autopsies to estimate the prevalence of subclinical vCJD. A report from the Group with recommendations concerning a large scale archive of tissues collected from coroners' autopsies will be submitted to DH imminently. SEAC strongly supported this approach.

(iii) HPA and the National Blood Service are investigating the possibility of using one or more prototype blood assays to measure prevalence. Assay manufacturers have been invited to tender to supply suitable tests to analyse around 50 000 anonymous blood samples. SEAC noted that interpretation of results from assays evaluated only on spiked samples and not blood from vCJD cases may be difficult. A decision on whether or not to proceed with this approach will be taken in three to four months time.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

SEAC was updated on an on going study on the susceptibility of red deer to BSE and informed a limited programme for surveillance of TSEs in deer in the UK had started recently.

⁴ <http://www.seac.gov.uk/statements/state260106.htm>