



Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HH

From the Parliamentary Secretary (Commons)

Charles Kennedy Esq MP
House of Commons
London
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Our ref: 75438

16 February 1994

Thank you for your letter of 20 January enclosing a copy of one from Mrs M Shine of Lennie House, West Lewiston, Drumnadrochit about Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE).

Firstly, in response to your own concern about an increase in the incidence of BSE amongst cattle may I assure you that over Great Britain as a whole we are now seeing a significant decrease in the number of suspect BSE cases being reported. In fact, in the last quarter of 1993 there were 15% fewer cases reported to the Ministry than in the same period in 1992. Whilst Scotland, taken alone, has until recently experienced fluctuating increases in report rate, it is encouraging to note that the level of suspect cases reported there over the past 4 week period is 11% down on the same period a year ago. The increase in the rate of reported cases in Scotland has been, however, a relative rather than absolute problem. With the incidence of BSE being relatively low in the region, disease introduced by the purchase of small numbers of cattle from England had a disproportionate effect on local incidence. Had such cases remained in their region of birth, their effect on local incidence would have been insignificant. Such movements are a consequence of normal trading patterns in Britain and are quite unrelated to the epidemic itself. The attached graphs of reported cases, by region, put the epidemic in Scotland into proportion.

In response to your request for information on research being undertaken into BSE and on the measures in place to protect human health from any risks from

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the disease, I enclose copies for you and Mrs Shine of the most recent Report on Research by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee and of a Progress Report on BSE in Great Britain which was presented to Parliament last November. In addition to detailing the measures taken to protect both human and animal health, the Progress Report provides an update on the results of research in hand.

Turning to the points in Mrs Shine's letter concerning CJD and human health implications, I should explain that these matters are dealt with by the Department of Health. However, officials at this Department have been in touch with theirs for information on these points.

While CJD is one of the family of spongiform encephalopathies, it is not, as it is sometimes described, "the human form of BSE". CJD has been recognised for decades as a naturally occurring, but rare, disease of humans which affects less than one person per million per year worldwide. The National CJD Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh, established in 1990, monitors suspected cases of CJD in the UK and has reported there were 48 definite or probable cases of CJD in the year ended 30 April 1993. The Unit produced Annual Reports in 1992 and 1993.

Mrs Shine refers to "25 deaths from CJD in the meat industry". This figure appears to have been taken primarily from data in the Unit's 1993 Annual Report. The Report provides information on the lifetime occupational histories for some of the definite and probable cases of CJD reported since May 1990. Included within these are a total of 23 cases of people working in the farming industry, butchers/abattoirs, occupations involving animal products, or animal laboratories. Most of these people left these jobs before, sometimes long before, the emergence of BSE. The Report concludes that "current information does not suggest that occupation is linked to an increased risk of developing CJD and this includes occupations which might involve an increased exposure to the agent of BSE". In addition, two cases of dairy farmers who died last year from CJD and whose herds were found to include cattle with BSE were widely reported. The Government's expert advisors considered both cases and agreed that there were no features that gave cause for undue concern.

There is no scientific evidence of a causal link between spongiform encephalopathies (such as BSE) in animals and CJD in humans. The Government, on advice from its expert advisors, is satisfied that all the necessary safeguards are in place to prevent any risk of transmission to humans. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) has said on a number of occasions that beef can be eaten safely by everyone. I am enclosing a copy of the CMO's statement about the recent case of a 16 year old girl alleged to be ill with CJD, in which he reiterates this point. I must also take this opportunity to correct Mrs Shine's belief that infectivity has been found in tissues other than brain and cervical spinal cord. This is simply not the case. Details of the results so far of tissue infectivity studies are given in the

enclosed reports. Many other transmission experiments with other tissues are still in progress.

Mrs Shine should know, however, that in its handling of the BSE epidemic, the Government has always acted as if BSE might be transmissible to humans and has introduced ultra-precautionary measures to protect the public from any remote and theoretical risks from the disease. These measures have been endorsed by scientific bodies in the UK and internationally and details are given in Appendix 2 of the Progress Report.

Moving on, offals from calves under 6 months of age were exempted from the list of specified bovine offals banned for use in human (and animal) food only after the most careful consideration. In dealing with BSE we have always based our control measures on the best scientific advice available. Calves under 6 months will have been born long after the ban on the use of ruminant protein in feedingstuffs for ruminant animals (July 1988), and will not therefore have had access to a food source of infection. Although sources of infection for cattle other than contaminated food cannot be completely ruled out, we have no firm evidence from epidemiological or experimental studies that either maternal or horizontal transmission of BSE is possible.

In studies of sheep infected with natural sheep scrapie (the disease of sheep from which BSE probably originated and which we know is transmitted maternally) the agent has not been found in animals under 10 months of age. A six month limit for cattle therefore provides an ample safety margin. I would add that this judgement is accepted internationally by bodies which include the European Commission and the Office International des Epizooties (an international veterinary organisation with over 130 member countries) it is also endorsed by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) an independent committee of scientific experts which advises this Ministry and the Department of Health on such diseases. SEAC has not recommended any change to this practice since the offals ban came into force. Furthermore, transmission experiments have already indicated that, of the specified offals, infectivity does not reside in intestine, spleen and tonsil.


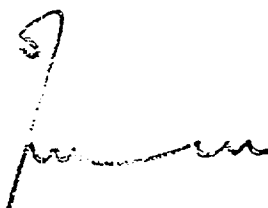
I should like to add that in practice calves' brains are used very little for meat products. Under the Meat Products and Spreadable Fish Products Regulations 1984 brain is not allowed in uncooked meat products. Furthermore brain is excluded from 'meat' as defined by the Regulations and cannot be included in the meat content in cooked products. This means that there is little incentive to use it in any retail meat products.

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Mrs Shine also expresses concern about the safety of slaughterhouse practices. These were investigated in 1990 by SEAC who concluded that spinal cord can be removed without contaminating meat for human consumption. They did

recommend however that as a precautionary measure any splitting of heads should be carried out after the removal of meat and away from meat for human consumption. Slaughterhouse practices were changed to take account of this advice.

Let me assure Mrs Shine that the Government has been totally open throughout the BSE epidemic. Results of research have been placed in the public domain at the earliest opportunity with, where necessary, reasoned scientific advice from SEAC. I would also point out that, contrary to Mrs Shine's impression, no evidence has been presented to support Professor Lacey's recent statements criticising the control measures taken by the Government in response to BSE. I would draw your attention to the fact that the House of Commons Select Committee on Agriculture considered evidence from Professor Lacey in its report on BSE in 1990 and its conclusions on his evidence have been published (HMSO Publication, ref: ISBN 010-244990-2 priced at £21.00).



THE HONOURABLE NICHOLAS SOAMES MP

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