

'Mad cow disease' — more good news

UNITED KINGDOM, USA, FRANCE, JAPAN —

In a world of ever-worsening bad news on the health front, recent developments in research on "mad cow disease" and its human-related variant have tended to fall into the good-news camp:

- A Harvard University study released Nov. 30 concluded that there is little risk of the disease, technically called BSE (for bovine spongiform encephalopathy), spreading to cattle in the USA and even less that its human form, vCJD (variant Creutzfeldt Jacob Disease), will infect people.

- French researchers reported Nov. 23 that the epidemic of Britons infected with vCJD "may have peaked" and

While BSE ravaged Europe's beef industry in the 1990s and some cases have appeared in Japan, and while about 100 Europeans have died of vCJD since 1995, composite world expertise is now questioning whether the microbe, if indeed there is one, represents a potential mass problem to the world, as some other experts have suggested

that the number of deaths may gradually go down in coming years.

- A public health medicine expert in Scotland reported Oct. 13 that BSE and vCJD may not be linked after all. George Venters said there is no direct evidence that the "folded protein" prion responsible for BSE and other animal diseases is infectious in humans.

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The Harvard study found that the 1997 US ban on feeding animal byproducts to cattle and sheep had greatly reduced the chance that mad cow disease would spread in the USA.

The prohibition was intended to prevent material from infected animals from being fed to other cattle. Meat and bone meal has long been added to animal feed as a protein supplement.

"Can we say there won't be a case of BSE in the United States? No, we can't . . . We all know there is no such thing as zero risk," said George Gray, acting director of Harvard's Center for Risk Analysis.

"What we can say after three years of study is that we are confident that BSE is not going to become a major public health or animal health threat in the United States," Gray said.

Even so, the US Department of Agriculture will step up testing of cattle for the disease from 5,000 in fiscal 2001 to 12,500 in fiscal 2002.

No cases of mad cow disease have been reported nor has there been a case of the human form of the disease in the USA.

The United States banned Japanese cattle imports Sept. 10. As of November, 214 of the 242 Japanese cattle imported between 1993 and 1999 had been traced. Of the 214, 24 had died or gone to slaughter and 40 were exported, according to the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

The Agriculture Department banned the import of British cattle in 1989 and expanded the ban to other European countries in 1997.

The French researchers, in a study appearing in the journal *Science*, said that "the peak of the epidemic will be in 2000-2001 and that the annual number of cases should gradually decrease after this date."

Also called vCJD, variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease is thought to be caused by eating meat from cattle infected with BSE.

About 1 million cattle in Britain are thought to have been

infected with BSE, which they caught from feed made from the carcasses of sheep infected with scrapie, an ovine form of the disease.

French researchers, led by Dr. Alain-Jacques Valleron, now estimate that the vCJD epidemic may not be nearly as extensive as earlier studies had suggested.

Last spring, John Collinge and colleagues at the Prion Unit of the Imperial School of Medicine, London, in releasing information on presumed "genetic linkage" sites of vCJD, found, in projecting huge new increases in the disease, that:

The alleged causative agent (prion) cannot be detected by standard tests or treated or eliminated by normal medications, has already crossed many species lines, and its presence in animals and animal products (everything from food to donated blood to gelatin capsules to leather wallets) means a huge component of the human population is already infected but is unaware of it (see *ICHF Newsletter V:2, 2001*).

But in Scotland, public health medical expert George Venters said that the evidence now available casts doubt on the BSE-vCJD prion causal link hypothesis.

Conspiracy theorists have presented the prion hypothesis as possible evidence of a biological warfare effort.

In the meantime, such BSE watchers as US osteopath Joseph M. Mercola argue that the recent research, downing the prion connection, only enhances the view that certain insecticides are the cause of mad cow disease and that United Kingdom pharmaceutical/chemical interests are ignoring or covering up the information.

His and related work point to organophosphates as at least contributory to the disease.

Rutgers looks at myrrh

USA — Rutgers University cell biologist Mohammed Rafi has found that one of the gifts traditionally provided to the Baby Jesus by "the three wise men" may have been wise, indeed:

Myrrh, a fragrant resin, contains the compound furanosesquiterpenoid, described as "very toxic to cancer cells." Another material slated for study at Rutgers for anti-cancer effects: frankincense.

Of gold, the third gift traditionally attributed to the Magi, Rafi told the media: "It doesn't have anti-cancer properties." Rafi made the strangely Christmasy announcement in December.

VA notes ALS connection to military Gulf War service

USA — In yet another study of Gulf War veterans said to be "preliminary," a study of military personnel deployed to the Gulf during the 1990 war reported they seem to be twice as likely to develop amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, Lou Gehrig Disease), an autoimmune pathology, than those who did not serve in the Gulf War zone, the Veterans Administration (VA) announced Dec. 10.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony J. Principi said he has authorized compensation for all Gulf War veterans who develop the incurable nerve-destroying disease and for their dependents or survivors.

The study compared the incidence of the fatal disease among 700,000 veterans who served in the Persian Gulf region to 1.8 million former service members who were stationed elsewhere.

The study found 40 veterans of Operation Desert Shield or Operation Desert Storm had ALS, for a rate of 6.7 cases per million persons. That compared with 67 cases, or 3.5 per million, among veterans who weren't in the Persian Gulf region.