



British Veterinary Association

7 Mansfield Street
London W1M 0AT
Tel: 020 7636 6541
Fax: 020 7436 2970

Chrissie Nicholls
Head of Veterinary Services

BVA

NEWS RELEASE

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Government's interim response to BSE Inquiry Report - BVA reaction

In responding to last Friday's publication of the Government's interim response to the BSE Inquiry report, David Tyson, President of the British Veterinary Association (BVA) said today (Wednesday) that 'the Minister of Agriculture's comment over the weekend' namely that food safety was top of the political agenda 'was hardly surprising given that other Member States were now in the grip of fears over BSE.

'While the Minister has rightly emphasised the need to look forward' said Mr Tyson 'the Government's response appears somewhat heavy on communication but light on future action. The main thrust seems to be to tell everybody everything, reform the culture of the Civil Service and set up more inter-departmental structures and additional scientific advisory committees. All very supportable' Mr Tyson continued, 'but horizontal in impact.

'There is no mention of watching for disease, no mention of action quickly and decisively and last, but by no means least, no mention of resources. If we are to try to avoid future occurrences along the lines of the BSE crisis then on-farm inspection by veterinarians is the starting point. As Lord Phillips so rightly said continuous surveillance for disease and continuous enforcement of controls are prerequisites.'

'We have endeavoured, Mr Tyson concluded 'to make MPs aware that the situation now is far worse than when BSE first appeared. Vets now visit fewer farms, and those they do they visit less frequently. There is no doubt that the potential exists for disease outbreaks to spread more quickly. And, at the very time we are calling for an improvement in veterinary surveillance the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) has announced the closure of one of their Veterinary Investigation Centres. And this on cost grounds not scientific logic.'

ENDS

Notes for Editors

A copy of the BVA's parliamentary briefing note is attached. For further information please contact Chrissie Nicholls or Helena Cotton at the BVA on 020 7636 6541.



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BRITISH VETERINARY ASSOCIATION

INTERIM RESPONSE TO BSE INQUIRY

BVA's REACTION

1. The government's interim response to the BSE Inquiry report contains detailed findings on twelve separate areas of BSE policy and science. BVA's response to a number of these areas covers:
 - (a) TSEs and research;
 - (b) disease control and surveillance;
 - (c) devolution, departments and advisers;
 - (d) legislation and enforcement;
 - (e) risk assessment and management; and
 - (f) audit.

TSEs AND RESEARCH

2. TSEs may be transmissible within and between species and by animal feed and food for humans. Further, tissues incubating a TSE may be infectious before clinical signs appear. A very small quantity of infective material may transmit a TSE in feed. The rendering process cannot be relied upon to inactivate TSEs. These issues are all matters of great concern and are not fully understood. The government is reviewing the present state of knowledge. BVA supports this. *But a clear strategy for research in TSEs is essential. A corporate research plan is needed.* The expertise, much gained through experience, is in place and so the government is well placed to tackle this problem. Many other countries will benefit from this work. It is a question of funds.

DISEASE CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE

3. The Inquiry's report emphasised that an effective system of animal disease surveillance was a prerequisite to the effective control of animal disease. Further that passive surveillance was essential to link farmers and veterinarians to the SVS, that the proximity of VI Centres to farms was important and that the information obtained from the system of surveillance should be disseminated as widely as possible.



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Systems are in place to identify List A and List B diseases. New diseases are another matter. BSE was a new disease in the 1980s. Understanding the source of the disease, the routes of infection, the effect of medicines and non-food routes presents major problems. The key is surveillance properly structured, properly targeted and systematically sustained. Veterinary surveillance is at the heart of control of infection and disease of animals. The BVA recognises the need for regrouping and extending traditional veterinary surveillance. *A Central Veterinary Surveillance Unit is required to give ownership and control over substantial resources for both active and passive surveillance.* The objectives are clear: to monitor all inputs to the food chain; to identify emerging disease and infection quickly; and to enable a rapid response to be made.

DEVOLUTION, DEPARTMENTS AND ADVISERS

4. Lord Phillips dwelt extensively on the range of bodies with an interest in BSE. These cover the newly created agencies from MAFF, the growing number of scientific advisory committees and sub-committees in the UK and the EU and the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Life has become more complicated in the public sector and Lord Phillips criticised the lack of coordination here and therefore the inability of MAFF agencies, local authorities and DoH to get their collective acts together. When it came to a comprehensive grasp of the BSE nettle the government was corporately fractured and found wanting. With these additional structures in government and a need to consult a wider audience self-evident, it will be harder for the profession to act more rapidly. *The BVA believes that Lord Phillips' concerns to learn by mistakes will pass unless a new spirit of incisiveness follows the government's wish for greater openness.* One should go with the other.

LEGISLATION AND ENFORCEMENT

5. The BVA supported the legislation that MAFF brought in during the late '80s and '90s but repeatedly condemned the lack of enforcement over animal feed and at the abattoir. This government is confident that it has the legal powers to act even when the situation is uncertain. The BVA disagrees. Responsive and rapid reaction will depend upon release of information from the private sector, particularly in the pig and poultry sectors under intensive systems, which is confidential. Further *BVA believes that the lessons learnt from lack of enforcement are just as much tied up with Treasury controls as those exerted by the Meat Hygiene Service.* The FSA will need to be more forceful when resources are required.



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RISK ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

6. The government seems to have mixed up risk management with communication. That is a recipe for more confusion. There are two different issues here. First an assessment of risk and in consequence managing the level of risk. Second, to give a clear exposition of why the government has opted for a particular level of risk. The BVA accepts the principle of risk assessment based on veterinary data and veterinary interpretation. It is also accepted that comprehensive surveillance would cost far more than government could reasonably allocate funds for. *It is time to stop talking of risk assessment in theoretical terms and put together a practical approach for adoption.* Failure to progress will leave government adopting the precautionary principle when a more objective approach could be applied.

AUDIT

7. The BSE Inquiry report was light on audit, although it was recognised that adequate internal departmental expertise to assess the contributions of scientific advisory committees was needed. This will not contribute much in the field though. At present MAFF's State Veterinary Service is expected to carry out an audit role in some areas. But it is not comprehensive or necessarily properly targeted. The adoption of risk management techniques as opposed to blanket coverage needs the 're-insurance' provided by audit. The BVA would like to see a clearer and forceful audit role for MAFF. *The whole food chain should be subject to audit. No areas should be exempt.*

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