BSE researchers bemoan 'ministry secrecy'

Paris. Scientific understanding of the epidemic of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in British cattle has been delayed by the reluctance of the UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) to provide access to data, according to UK scientists. This reluctance, they say, has stemmed both from a 'culture of secrecy' at the ministry, and its failure to dedicate sufficient staff to analysing and distributing data on the epidemic.

Direct evidence of secrecy at MAFF comes from the uphill struggle faced by Roy Anderson, professor of zoology at the University of Oxford, and his colleagues, in gaining access to the confidential MAFF statistics needed to produce their recent analysis of the transmission dynamics and epidemiology of the BSE epidemic (see *Nature* **382**, 787; 1996).

Indeed, *Nature* has learnt that MAFF agreed to make the statistics available only after senior officials at the Royal Society put pressure on government ministers, arguing that a credible analysis of MAFF data could be done only by independent experts.

Anderson's study was designed to estimate the number of infected cattle that may have entered the food chain undetected because they were slaughtered before showing clinical symptoms of BSE, and the efficiency of various culling policies designed to reduce the incidence of BSE. Both analyses required raw data on individual farms and the demography of herds, which — according to several sources — MAFF initially refused to provide.

"It was pretty clear that MAFF were scared about the outcome," says one scientist involved in the lengthy negotiations, suggesting that this was because the data would suggest — as they did — that many more sick animals had entered the food chain than was previously thought. MAFF eventually backed down and released the data, he says, after it had been persuaded that an independent epidemiological analysis of the BSE analysis was needed, given that Britain's European partners would be sceptical if this were done by MAFF, which would be perceived as having a vested interest in the outcome — only in this way would other European countries be convinced that the study had been carried out "scientifically and properly".

Anderson declines to comment on this account of events. And a ministry spokeswoman dismisses allegations that it has been overly secretive, claiming that access to data is permitted within agreed collaborative projects. Requests for data that are readily available are met automatically, she says. Those for data that are more difficult to compile must be made through a more formal written procedure that includes a fee calculated on the basis of the amount and type of data required, and a *pro rata* charge for the salary costs needed to prepare it.

The spokeswoman last week promised that scientists can obtain all the data they need "as long as we deem it possible, and as long as the data doesn't infringe on the confidentiality of individual farmers or the data protection act". She declined to provide a copy of the detailed procedures for obtaining data, however, on the grounds that they had to be formally applied for through so-called 'open government' channels.

Not everyone has had problems. Several researchers acknowledge that MAFF has been helpful in providing relatively small sets of data. They point out that aggregated information has been made available, while MAFF's Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL) in Weybridge has regularly published epidemiological studies. Similarly, Heino Diringer, a researcher at the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin, says that while he has never asked MAFF for statistical data, he has not encountered problems in obtaining other information.

But one scientist who has had difficulty obtaining data from MAFF complains of a "culture of confidentiality" among government ministries, and MAFF in particular. "This has worked to the detriment of the understanding [of the BSE epidemic] and dissemination of information in general," he says, pointing out that the health and environment ministries have better track records "in terms of being open and involving scientists from outside government".

"It has been a nightmare to get hold of comprehensive data," says John Kent, a statistician at the University of Leeds, adding that "not having the numbers more easily available has made life difficult". Kent is keen that MAFF should now make widely available the data used in the Anderson study so that they can be critically assessed.

Anderson agrees that this is necessary. But he points out that the database is not his to give, and that scientists must request it from MAFF. Mark Savey, a leading French epidemiologist working on BSE, says he has been given assurances by MAFF scientists that he will be given access to the particular datasets he wants.

Allegations of excessive secrecy within MAFF are confirmed by one MAFF scientist involved in BSE research. He says that while wider access to data on BSE might not have had much practical impact on the handling of the epidemic, MAFF's lack of openness has been "deplorable". "There is a general principle of not wanting to give the data to anybody. But then the political pressure became so great that it had to be given to the Anderson group," he says. "We shouldn't have been able to withhold data."

The MAFF spokeswoman defends the ministry's actions, however, arguing that its BSE database contains confidential information on individual farms, whose release is forbidden by current government policy; such databases must also respect the provisions of data protection legislation.

Anderson agrees that these factors are important. But he says that they are not insurmountable obstacles to the release of data, pointing out that the databases relating to the AIDS epidemic were made available to the entire scientific community "for analysis and interpretation".

Similarly, the spokeswoman argues that the general release of data could be misleading in the wrong hands. This view is supported by several scientists. "You can't make primary data widely available because it's too complicated," says one. "You need to first make a synthesis." Uncontrolled release of data could cause more problems than it solves, he says, through misinterpretation by both scientists and the press. ▶

Hubble reveals shadow of Jupiter's moon

This unusual picture of Jupiter and its volcanic moon Io shows the moon's shadow, about 3,600 km in diameter, sweeping across the planet's cloud cover at a speed of 17 km a second.

Taken in July at violet wavelengths by the Hubble Space Telescope, using its Wide Field Planetary Camera 2, the image, released last week, is one of a series intended to complement those being taken by the Galileo spacecraft now orbiting Jupiter. □

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