

## Food and Drink

*Food Standards Agency Project ZM 0306*

### **Butchery Practices in the UK**

The report finds evidence that contamination of food with BSE agent could, in the 1980s and early 1990's, occur through standard butchery practices. Tighter regulation and inspection should now prevent this. In any case the frequency of infectivity in cattle is now relatively low.

A report in 2001 concluded that a local cluster of vCJD cases near Queniborough (in Leicestershire) was probably related to consumption of beef acquired from two local butchers. The research reported here was designed to assess whether or not the practices adopted in these two butchers were unusual. The butchers had processed bovine heads and removed brain in the 1980s, before the specified bovine offals regulations came into being (1989, later updated to prevent the use split heads 1992).

The report concludes that practices were not sufficiently different to provide an explanation for the local clustering of cases but that the techniques used would lead to contamination of human food with brain tissue.

Some butchers (in Northumberland) used brains in the production of potted meat up to 1984. Brains were exported to France and, sold by special order to local customers. Around 10% of butchers collected blood for use in black pudding.

Head meat (apart from brain) was incorporated into low grade meat products (e.g. sausages, pies) or sold as pet food.

#### Comment

On balance, it remains likely that the cluster of cases was related to supply from these identifiable sources but that the methods used in food preparation were not significantly below the standard that would be expected at the time. Some of the relevant exposure probably predated the 1987 Consumer Protection Act [which relies on strict liability].

The lack of clustering of similar cases anywhere else in the UK could be explained by greater diversity of exposure.

Data was obtained by self report in 2003. Enforcement of the Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations 1992 had been stepped up in the early 1990s, but earlier Regulation should have already been sufficient to prevent the inclusion of brains in potted meat (Meat Products and Spreadable Fish Products Regulations 1984). In our view, it was likely that a butcher would answer questions according to legal requirements and not necessarily according to actual practice.