

BSE maternal transmission results may be released soon

Paris. The UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) is expected to bow to both domestic and European pressure in the near future by releasing preliminary results from a study into the risk of maternal transmission of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle.

The study, which is being carried out blind, was set up by MAFF in 1989 and is scheduled to end next year. It is designed to compare the incidence of BSE in the offspring of 315 confirmed cases of BSE with that in offspring from 315 control cows.

But interpreting the study will be more difficult than originally planned, because many animals were fed ruminant protein and could have become infected in that way. The researchers involved say that although this will reduce the statistical power of the study, the latter is still "not too bad". Some experts, however, are concerned that the possible contamination study may leave statistically unresolved the question of whether maternal transmission occurs.

John Wilesmith, the researcher at MAFF's Central Veterinary Laboratory in charge of the study, says that he is making a substantial effort to complete most of it by next month, when he will break the codes hiding information about the group to which each calf belongs, with the aim of publishing the preliminary results in August.

According to Wilesmith, the study was designed so that cattle would be slaughtered on their seventh birthday — a sufficient period to allow the disease to develop — and as most of the cattle were born during the 1988 calving season, they were slaughtered last autumn. It should be possible to

process around 500 brains by next month, says Wilesmith. "It wouldn't be the end point, but it would provide enough for a preliminary publication."

Wilesmith's action follows public calls from Sir Richard Southwood, professor of zoology at the University of Oxford and chairman of an early inquiry into BSE, that the results of the study should be made available early, provided that such a move does not compromise its statistical power. One UK expert says that unless MAFF makes the data available it will be suspected of holding back information. "Secrecy fuels fear," he says.

Indeed, Southwood says that establishing whether or not maternal transmission occurs would help to restore public confidence in the scientific basis for policy decisions about BSE, as well as having practical implications for efforts to eradicate the disease.

Of the 150 brains already processed, 51 have been found to show signs of BSE. Because the study is blind, it is not known to which group these cases belong. But Wilesmith says that this overall incidence suggests that if maternal transmission is occurring, it is at low rates. It is "tending towards zero" and "couldn't be more than five per cent", he says.

If such predictions are borne out by the results of the study, they would confirm field observations suggesting that maternal transmission of BSE occurs at low rates, if at all. According to MAFF, the incidence of BSE in the offspring of confirmed cases of BSE in the field is much the same as would be expected if contaminated feed had been the only source of infection. **Declan Butler**

Venture capitalists invest record funds in US technology

San Francisco. US venture capitalists are spending more than ever on new ideas for technology, according to a recent survey by the accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand, which has found that venture capital spending reached a record level during the first quarter of this year.

The \$2.3 billion was double the sum for the same period last year, and \$150 million more than the previous record of \$2.1 billion, set in the fourth quarter of 1995. "Clearly we are in the midst of an explosion," says James D. Atwell, chairman of the firm's National Venture Capital Group, in the report.

The report says that California enjoyed the most private equity dollars, with 162 deals valued at \$699.4 million. Massachusetts followed, with 79 deals worth \$249.2 million. Software led the top-funded industries, followed by communications, health care, electronics and biotechnology.

Health care showed particular growth, with a 75 per cent increase over the earlier quarter. Coopers & Lybrand say that the medical-related industries are benefiting from the need to serve an ageing population.

The Mayfield Fund in Menlo Park, California, was among the top 10 most active venture capital firms during the quarter. Its newest fund, called the Mayfield VIII, had already funded 23 companies since it closed in October 1995. "It's an unbelievable time," said Grant Heidrich, a partner in the fund.

According to Heidrich, the surge in funding has been driven by three factors; entrepreneurs are presenting excellent ideas to invest in, there is capital available, and the past 18 to 24 months have produced stunning yields for venture companies. In general, he added, Americans are starting to save money in mutual funds and other vehicles, which in turn seek places to invest.

Meanwhile, the cloud over health care and biotechnology investments has lifted with a shift to free market forces in managed care, and a more favourable environment for new products at the Food and Drug Administration.

The record quarter for venture funding followed a record year for initial public offerings of biotechnology companies. During 1995, 61 companies raised \$2.1 billion in stock offerings.

But Heidrich admits that there is some concern that the buoyant market will not last — and cutbacks in research at university level could do serious harm. Five years from now, there may be fewer ideas to invest in, because of a reluctance today to fund bold and risky scientific projects, he says. **Sally Lehrman**

Prion research programme proposed

Paris. The European Commission has proposed setting up a ECU100–150 million (US\$123–185 million) research programme into BSE and other prion diseases. The commission raised the matter at the European Council meeting in Florence last weekend, and is expected to follow this up with a formal proposal in the near future.

The commission is asking that funding for the programme should be additional to existing allocations for research, and should come from other European Union (EU) budgets. A call for proposals would be issued for research to characterize the agents responsible for prion diseases, and to reinforce clinical research on Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD). The commission is also

seeking to coordinate and strengthen CJD surveillance networks.

Meanwhile, the commission has also agreed to set up a multidisciplinary committee on BSE intended to "ensure that the scientific advice on BSE given to the commission takes into account the widest possible range of expertise". Members of the committee will be chosen by a seven-member steering group, which includes Robert Will, head of the UK National CJD Surveillance Unit.

The new committee will be only consultative, and political power remains in the hands of the agriculture directorate's Standing Veterinary Committee, recently criticized for allowing its judgement to be influenced by political factors (see *Nature* 381, 353; 1996). **D. B.**