Scientists show that vCJD can be transmitted through blood

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Scientists have warned that variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), the human form of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), could be transmitted through whole blood transfusions by donors who have no symptoms of the disease.

The warning follows new research with animals showing that BSE can be passed from a diseased sheep to a healthy animal.

But the UK Department of Health and the National Blood Service of England and north Wales said there was no evidence that vCJD had ever been transmitted to humans through blood transfusions. They said the risk was theoretical as whole blood was no longer used for transfusions in the United Kingdom, the white cells being removed by a process called leucodepletion.

In the new study (*Lancet* 2000;356:955-9) researchers at the Institute for Animal Health in Newbury and Edinburgh took blood from sheep that had been fed brains from cattle infected with BSE. The blood was taken

from the 19 sheep before any symptoms of disease appeared in the animals.

The blood was then transfused into healthy sheep from New Zealand, and 610 days later one of the sheep that had received the blood began to show signs of BSE. The other sheep given blood are healthy, said the report, but were mostly given the blood later than the affected animal.

"We have shown that it is possible to transmit BSE to a sheep by transfusion with whole blood taken from another sheep during the symptomless phase of an experimental BSE infection," said the report.

The report, which points out that whole blood is not now used in UK transfusions, adds, "Although this result was in only one animal, it indicates that BSE can be transmitted between individuals of the same species by whole-blood transfusion."

Dr Tim Wallington, medical spokesman for the National Blood Service, said, "We have closely monitored the develop-

Australia might now follow its US and Canadian counterparts and ban donors who have lived in the UK in the 1980s and early '90s

ment in the science of vCJD ever since it was acknowledged that the cause of the disease was most likely to be from exposure to BSE. Systems for reporting are robust, and it remains the case that there is no direct evidence of blood transmission of vCJD in humans."

He added, "The use of UK donated plasmas in the production of blood products has ceased. They are now made from imported plasma from countries where there is a very low incidence of BSE and no vCJD."

The Department of Health has described as "speculative"

the reports that an 11 month old baby was born with vCJD after contracting it in the womb from her mother, who later died of the disease.

The Red Cross in Australia is establishing contingency plans in case the country's health ministers accept advice to ban an estimated 30 000 people from donating blood. The group includes people who were in Britain for more than six months in the 1980s and early '90s. The US, Canadian, and New Zealand governments have already imposed similar bans. □

Full story in News Extra at bmj.com

Sterilisation of 14 mentally handicapped women challenged

Alexander Dorozynski *Paris*

An association for mentally handicapped people in France has claimed that 14 mentally handicapped young women have been sterilised without their consent. It is demanding a criminal investigation.

The claim comes from the Association for the Defence of the Handicapped in the Yonne administrative district. The women all attend a centre for mentally handicapped people in

Sens, a town 120 kilometres south of Paris, which takes both men and women on a residential or day basis.

The young women, aged between 25 and 32 at the time of the operation, were surgically sterilised. According to the law, such sterilisation is a permanent mutilation and, unless it is carried out for medical reasons and with the consent of the patients and parents, and with the

approval of a medical committee, it is a crime, punishable by up to 30 years' imprisonment.

An investigation was initiated last year by the Directorship of Sanitary and Social Affairs, an official government department, after it received an anonymous letter denouncing "severe impairment to the physical integrity of handicapped women" from sterilisations performed from 1991 to 1998.

The investigators concluded that the operations had been carried out according to ethical rules, in the absence of a more clear cut judicial framework.

"That's for the judge to determine," Pierre Gonzalez de

Gaspard, attorney for the plaintiffs, said last week. The complaint was filed after three of the women said that the sterilisations had been carried out against the will of the residents, for contraceptive purposes, without medically imperative indications.

Marie-France Pasquini, associate director of the Association for Adult and Young Handicapped People, a federation that oversees the work home in Sens, says that surgical contraception was carried out when other contraceptive measures did not succeed, with the agreement of the families and of the handicapped women themselves. □