

proteins of GAS may predispose to severe GAS disease [5].

The Strep-EURO project has managed to create a platform for epidemiological analysis of and research into severe streptococcal disease in ten European Union countries and one EU candidate country. The 2003 results, in which three times the expected number of cases were identified primarily through improvements to case ascertainment methods, indicate the success of the surveillance. The apparent overall increase of invasive cases may thus partly depend on the stimulus of Strep-EURO to the establishment of national surveillance systems and the enhancement of existing ones.

Though incidence estimates are preliminary at this point, the marked fluctuations noted between countries may be attributable to a number of factors: true differences in rates of severe GAS infection, under-reporting to the national laboratory, or lack or failure of microbiological diagnostic procedures (e.g. no blood cultures prior to treatment). Definitive conclusions will have to await careful analysis of the data. The frequency of unusual *emm*-types is a concern from the point-of-view of prevention since current candidate vaccines against GAS are mostly based upon the M protein, the type-variable, most important virulence factor of this organism.

Actions required in the immediate future include standardisation of subtyping by PFGE and MLST, which will allow efficient cross-talk and tracking of strains among laboratories, and a detailed assessment of unambiguous *emm*-type assignment based on DNA sequences. There is also a need for further work to study the maintenance of tetracycline resistance despite the lack of use of this drug for treatment of streptococcal diseases.

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BSE AGENT IN GOAT TISSUE: FIRST KNOWN NATURALLY OCCURRING CASE CONFIRMED

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On 28 January, the European Commission confirmed the first known naturally occurring case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) agent in a goat, slaughtered in France in 2002 [1]. Previously, sheep and goats had only been experimentally infected. The results have only been made available now, as the confirmatory tests included mouse bioassays, which took two years to complete.

Neither the infected goat, nor any other goat from the same herd, entered either the food or feed chain. This incident is therefore not considered to represent a risk to public health. The entire herd was slaughtered after the infected goat was first suspected to be infected with BSE agent. All adult goats in the herd were tested, and no other goat was found to have BSE infection or to show other signs of BSE disease [2].

The infected goat was born in 2000. A ban on feeding meat and bone meal (MBM) to ruminants (i.e., cattle, sheep and goats) has been in place since 1994; this was extended to all farmed animals in 2001. Goats in the European Union generally only live for a few years, which means that the majority of goats in the EU today were born after the total feed ban was put in place. Nevertheless, in response to this case of confirmed natural BSE infection in a goat, the Commission is proposing to improve vigilance for such incidents by increasing BSE testing of goats, and has set a target of 200 000 healthy goats tested in the European Union over the next six months. The current EU wide surveillance programme, designed to detect suspicious TSE strains in small ruminants in the EU, has tested 140 000 goats since 2002 [3].

It is proposed that the TSE monitoring programme will concentrate on member states where BSE is present in cattle. All confirmed cases of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE, includes scrapie) will undergo three-stage testing (already in use), which will differentiate between scrapie and BSE. These additional measures will be submitted for member states' approval at the beginning of February.

As a precautionary measure and following scientific advice, milk and meat from goats which are affected by any type of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (including scrapie) cannot currently be used, following a recommendation in 2001 from the European Commission Scientific Steering Committee [4]. Specified risk materials (the tissues most likely to carry infectivity if the disease is present) are also removed from all goats, even if healthy [5,6].

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA, <http://www.efsa.eu.int/>) has advised that, based on current scientific knowledge, goat milk and derived products are unlikely to present any risk of TSE contamination if the milk comes from healthy animals [7]. It advises no change in current consumption of goat milk, cheese and meat.

The European Commission has asked the EFSA to carry out a quantitative risk assessment for goat meat and goat meat products, which is expected to be ready by July 2005. Further information can be found on the European Commission pages Food Safety – from the Farm to the Fork http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/index_en.htm.

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