

The Editor
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Sir

NEED FOR VIGILANCE IN THE AFTERMATH OF FMD AND CSF

The last confirmed case of FMD in the UK was recorded on 30 September 2001. Since then, all counties in Great Britain have been classed as FMD free for the purposes of licensed movements of animals, following an absence of outbreaks of disease for at least 3 months and extensive serological surveillance of sheep and goat flocks. On 22 January 2002, the OIE (World Animal Health Organisation) restored the UK's FMD-free status as far as international trade is concerned. On 5 February 2002, the EU's Standing Veterinary Committee voted to remove the remaining FMD restrictions on intra-community trade in live animals, fresh meat and animal products from Great Britain.

The absence of disease since 30 September, coupled with extensive statistical serological surveillance of sheep since then, suggests that the risk of latent FMD infection in Great Britain is now very small. Nevertheless it would be prudent to adopt a precautionary approach over the coming months, and particularly during the lambing period (February–April) as the stress of lambing could in theory reactivate latent infection. While this applies especially in areas where disease occurred most recently, it cannot be guaranteed that any risk will be confined to those areas, given the livestock movements which have taken place over the autumn and winter.

Final cleansing and disinfection of all previously affected farms is not yet complete in England and Wales. Some premises will remain under restrictions for 12 months (effectively for most of 2002) because they are too difficult or fragile to clean and disinfect. There remains a small risk that virus could survive in the buildings or on the pasture of these premises although with the passage of time the latter risk is much lower. The possibility that a recrudescence of disease could occur during controlled restocking (as was the case in the 1967/68 outbreak) cannot and should not be ignored.

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It is essential, therefore, that veterinarians and farmers remain vigilant for signs of disease. In adult sheep, the signs are very mild and transient. At lambing, the death of lambs may be an indication of the underlying condition as is rapidly spreading lameness accompanied by pyrexia. There may be evidence of post mortem lesions in the myocardium (tiger hearts) of lambs. When asked to investigate increased lameness in adult sheep or mortality in lambs at lambing time, veterinarians should not overlook FMD as a possible differential diagnosis. Where they cannot exclude the possibility of FMD, they should report their findings to the local Animal Health Divisional Office (AHDO) for investigation. Where veterinary staff from the AHDO believe there are grounds for suspecting disease, the flock will be placed under Form A restrictions and samples will be taken and submitted to IAH Pirbright for laboratory investigation. The decision to slaughter the flock will be taken only after the results of laboratory investigation are available.

Veterinarians are also reminded of the consultation procedure whereby if they attend cases where they are uncertain whether FMD should be included in the differential diagnosis, provided the veterinarian remains on the premises, an experienced DEFRA veterinary officer will attend the case and carry out an investigation in consultation with the veterinarian without the initial service of restrictions.

Neither should we ignore the risk of FMD or other exotic diseases being introduced from outside Great Britain. The occurrence of outbreaks of classical swine fever (August 2000) and FMD (February 2001) in short succession may suggest a heightened background risk in comparison with the past. The Government is commissioning a scientific risk assessment of this and tougher controls on imports are under consideration. However, controls against illegal imports can never be 100% effective, so the risk of importing exotic animal diseases such as FMD and CSF cannot be eliminated entirely. Compared with cattle and sheep, pigs are most susceptible to oral infection with FMD and can excrete large amounts of virus by the aerosol route. This coupled with the fact that many pigs are now reared in outdoor units means they are particularly vulnerable to FMD and CSF introduced via infected meat and meat products and have a unique capacity to disseminate disease to other species of livestock. It is therefore vital that farmers are alert to the vulnerability of pigs, particularly those in outdoor units, to accidental or deliberate introduction of diseases such as FMD and CSF, that they appreciate the particular susceptibility of pigs to FMD infection via the oral route and that they understand the reasons for the total ban on the feeding of swill and waste food and the need to comply with it.

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