

Clue: A major city



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Return of mad cow disease - warning

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The Government's chief adviser on the human form of mad cow disease has warned of a possible new wave of the illness that could kill as many as 350 people in the UK.

Professor Chris Higgins highlighted a case being investigated by scientists in which a patient dying from variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) appears to have a different gene type - or strain - from previous British victims.

Prof Higgins, who chairs the Government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, said that if confirmed, this case could mark the start of a second wave of deaths over the coming years involving anything between 50 and 350 people.

The first wave of vCJD, caused by eating infected beef products in the 1980s and early 1990s, has been responsible for 164 deaths, peaking at 28 in 2000 and dwindling over the following years to about one case annually.

All of these victims belonged to a gene type known as MM. Every individual inherits either an M or V gene from each of their parents, determining their vulnerability to vCJD. Those with two M genes - the MM group - make up 42% of the population and are thought to be more susceptible, while those with one of each - the MVs - are thought to be more resistant and constitute 47% of Britons.

Clinical tests suggest that the new patient has an MV gene type, although this cannot be definitively confirmed until brain biopsy is carried out after death.

The possibility of an MV sufferer has raised concerns among scientists that the illness may have a longer incubation period among this group than among MMs and that other victims may soon start to show symptoms of an infection contracted as long as two decades ago.

The mother of Andy Black, from Southsea, Hampshire, who died from vCJD a year ago this week at the age of 24, is due at 10 Downing Street to raise awareness of the concerns.

Christine Lord's son was found to have the MM gene type, but she is concerned that the public is unaware of the danger of a new wave of cases.

Ms Lord will present a petition addressed to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, raising questions over how the BSE crisis was handled by the former Conservative government and asking whether the country faces a further wave of vCJD cases.

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