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'My son caught human form of mad cow disease from his baby food'

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By Cordelia O'Neill

A VICTIM of a strain of CJD may have caught the disease from eating infected baby food decades ago, his father said yesterday.

Grant Goodwin, 30, of Hamilton, Lanarkshire, died in January after experiencing personality change, memory loss, unsteadiness and hallucinations. He was the first person of his gene type to die of variant CJD.

In the UK, 170 people have died of vC

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JD – a brain disease that can be caused by eating infected meat – and all of them were thought to have shared a particular gene.

But Grant's father, Thomas, said his son had a different genetic make-up, prompting fears that many other people could have the disease but were not showing symptoms. Scientists said the death suggested strains of the disease may have an incubation period spanning decades.

Mr Goodwin said his son may have caught vCJD from the baby food he was fed as a child.

In a BBC interview, he said: "Grant was a very happy-go-lucky person. He was a bit of a jack-the-lad, a party animal, he loved the good life."

But as the disease took hold, his personality changed and he became depressed. After he began complaining of pain in his legs and head, his parents moved him back to Scotland from the Channel Islands.

When he saw his son at the airport, Mr Goodwin took him straight to hospital, thinking he had a tumour. He was diagnosed with vCJD. Mr Goodwin said: "Once the illness set into Grant, the brain cells were slowly getting killed off and he became someone else. He was seeing things, he was paranoid; it was absolutely unbelievable what that illness actually does to people."

A month later, the family were told he had a different gene type from other victims.

"Professor Peter Rudge came up from London and it was him that told us that Grant was the first with his gene type in the world that's died of variant CJD," Mr Goodwin said. "I feel we need to get this out in the open, because people need to see the early symptoms."

Many infected individuals could die from other causes before reaching the end of the incubation period, experts believe. Fears of a major epidemic claiming thousands of lives surfaced at the height of the "mad cow disease" scare in the 1990s. The disaster never materialised, and since 1994 only around 200 cases of vCJD have been confirmed worldwide.

In the UK the total number of definite and probable cases of vCJD now stands at 170, including four suspected victims who are still alive. To date, every person confirmed as having vCJD has had a particular "homozygous" form of the human prion gene known as MM.

Scientists investigating the case, led by Professor John Collinge, from the Medical Research Council Prion

Unit in London, pointed out that related brain diseases had longer incubation periods in people with the heterozygous MV prion gene.

They included kuru, thought to be linked to cannibalism in Papua New Guinea, and CJD triggered by treatment with growth hormones. Writing in The Lancet medical journal, the researchers said some MV patients with kuru had incubated the disease for more than 50 years.

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