THE ROYAL SOCIETY

The Academy of Medical Sciences

Summary of oral evidence: Jeffrey Vergerson

24 May 2006

Mr Vergerson is a free range egg producer and trustee of the British Egg Marketing Board (BEMB). He is vice chairman of the British Egg Association and a member of Defra's Advisory Committee on Organic Standards.

Members of the working group present were: Sir John Skehel, Professor Glynis Breakwell, Professor Neil Ferguson, Dr John McCauley, Professor Andrew McMichael, Professor Karl Nicholson, Dr Geoffrey Schild and Professor Robin Weiss.

Key points

Poultry Industry

Mr Vergerson consults for and advises a group of about 50 farmers who are free-range egg producers. He spoke about the two cases of H7N3 avian influenza found in Norfolk recently, which involved the same veterinarian. When the first case was identified, Mr Vergerson carried out a telephone poll of all the free range egg producers he advised in the immediate area to ask whether egg production was reduced or if there was any increase in bird fatalities. A low-pathogenic virus like H7N3 is not easy to pick up in poultry as the symptoms are quite mild. In Mr Vergerson's view, the system worked well in terms of the interactions with farmers and how the information was declared.

In normal situations the vet shares information on the health status of the poultry flocks for the whole group with Mr Vergerson. The outbreak was detected initially on a broiler breeder site and may not have been detected in the free range flocks if it wasn't for this, as the symptoms were relatively mild and could have more benign causes. To date it is not known where the infection came from. In a free-range farm it is not possible to have total biosecure facilities because the farms are open to the environment. The birds feed and water inside but they are allowed outside every day on to range, in line with EU regulations.

The same vet consulted with both farms that were infected but vets are not supposed to test for avian influenza, it is a notifiable disease so must be reported to Defra if suspected. There are instances of the same individuals working on different sites where staff are sometimes shared between free range farms of the same ownership, but there is normally little movement of individuals between differently owned farms.

Vaccination

Mr Vergerson has been involved in discussions with the poultry industry on avian influenza vaccination. The scientific advice for the veterinary care of poultry comes from the vets and vaccine manufacturers. The feeling amongst the commercial poultry farmers is that vaccination may not be a good idea at present and there is a worry that it could mask the spread of disease. The vaccine manufacturers have told the farmers that vaccinated birds may still be shedding virus when infected with influenza. Vaccination also affects the export market for these birds. The poultry industry has decided not to implement avian influenza vaccination yet, although it is constantly under review.

Surveillance

Mr Vergerson does not get involved in the surveillance of wild birds. His own farm was surveyed for avian influenza last year in a routine surveillance exercise by Defra. This routine sampling of farms by Defra has been carried out for some years.

Concerns for the poultry industry

Mr Vergerson has concerns about keeping free-range poultry indoors for long periods of time as it is very stressful for birds that are used to being outside and can cause problems in the flock.

A major concern for those working in the poultry industry is the danger of being infected with high pathogenic avian influenza from poultry. Should the infection come into the country through the environment, rather than via people travelling from abroad, Mr Vergerson believes that poultry workers should be considered front-line staff for antiviral treatment.

Protocols for the protection of staff have always been in place in poultry farms and procedures have been improved to cut down the risk of infection. This includes washing down lorries before they are allowed onto farms and improving procedures for the disposal of dead birds.

In Mr Vergerson's view it was most likely a wild bird that infected the poultry flocks in Norfolk, but he believes Defra is currently investigating all possible routes of spread.

Mr Vergerson is concerned by part of the Defra/EU compensation policies for avian influenza. The low-pathogenic form of infection is also a notifiable disease and suspected cases are investigated by Defra. They can close down the poultry farm until test results are known. This results in the farmers potentially losing quite a lot of money because they do not receive compensation if the tests prove negative but cannot move any animals or eggs during the period of investigation. This could discourage farmers from reporting suspected cases of low-pathogenic influenza.

It is not really known whether other outbreaks of low-pathogenic influenza may have occurred in poultry in the past because it is difficult to pick up the disease in flocks due to the fact that symptoms may be relatively mild.