THE ROYAL SOCIETY

The Academy of Medical Sciences

Summary of oral evidence: Howard Hellig

24 May 2006

Howard Hellig is a consultant poultry veterinarian and a Past President of the British Veterinary Association (BVA).

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 Hellig explained that knowledge of the poultry industry was critical in order to understand the population dynamics of poultry under the different situations in which they are kept. He has recently been commissioned by Defra to produce a report on the structure of the poultry industry in the United Kingdom to aid policy making. Since 1990 there has been a large increase in the numbers of free range flocks which has an implication for the control of avian influenza. Mr Hellig explained that flocks kept in housing were more secure than those on the range, although there are implications for the free range status of poultry if they are bought inside.

Mr Hellig reported that Defra has worked closely with the poultry industry over the last two years and believes that the plans in place are robust and will work in an avian influenza outbreak. He also reported that the new EU legislation was a considerable improvement on the previous arrangements and that the industry in general was comfortable with the contingency arrangements in particular as it recognises the need for flexibility.

Vaccination

Mr Hellig explained that he was not a supporter of vaccination of poultry for avian influenza. It is not possible to vaccinate broiler chickens due their short lifespan (around 6 weeks) and the large numbers of birds. If vaccination of rare breed and elite pedigree stock used for breeding takes place it may stop the export of such birds to other countries where vaccination is not undertaken. Mr Hellig told the group he preferred physical containment as the main control mechanism.

Where vaccination for avian influenza is permitted vaccination is used almost entirely in turkeys, breeders and layers. Mr Hellig explained that in large flocks vaccination rates, even under the supervision of an experienced veterinarian, never reach 100% which has been seen to decrease to around 75% and even as low as 65% when carried out unsupervised by trained farm employees. Routine vaccination is not a procedure undertaken by veterinarians in the UK. Mr Hellig also explained that there is a lack of veterinarians who are experienced in working with poultry. Mr Hellig believes that this will have a considerable impact on any large scale outbreaks of avian influenza when large numbers of experienced veterinarians will be needed. He did not have any immediate solutions but suggested the problem requires further consideration.

Surveillance

Surveillance of poultry flocks for a range of diseases, including avian influenza, is primarily undertaken by the poultry farm owners and their own veterinarians and not by Defra. The results of tests on poultry are the

property of the farm owner who is under no obligation to pass on the information, unless it is a notifiable disease. Mr Hellig reported that recent changes to guidance from Defra mean that any routine test for avian influenza, irrespective of the result, have to be notified to Defra. Avian influenza is one of four diseases that must be notified to Defra. Mr Hellig also reported that as far as he was aware there have been no efforts to establish better links between veterinarians and doctors.

Mr Hellig highlighted problems with the compensation arrangements being operated by Defra for premises infected with avian influenza and the potential impact on the reporting of the suspicion of LPAI by farmers. Currently, farmers receive compensation for healthy birds at the point of slaughter and not from the point of reporting or confirmation of an outbreak this is of crucial importance with HPAI.