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Mother of teenage CJD victim speaks out for first time -

# WHY IS MY GIRL DYING?

by ALAN WATKINS

ONCE, she was a happy, healthy, schoolgirl. Sparkling, full of fun.

Today, at 16, Victoria Rimmer is dying of a cruel disease that has made an old woman of her.

She is desperately thin. Her balance has gone. Her sight is blurred. She has uncontrollable shaking spasms.

And her despairing mother, helplessly looking on, believes that the sickness slowly killing her was caused by eating meat infected with "mad cow disease".

That sickness, steadily destroying Vicky's brain, is Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, the incurable human form of the cattle infection Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis.

Yet even when doctors at Liverpool's Walton Hospital decided Vicky had CJD, the verdict was kept secret. Staff were ordered not to discuss it.

That secrecy was broken only when TODAY exposed the case exclusively, earlier this month.

Vicky is the youngest person in Britain known to have caught CJD. Sufferers are usually 45 or older. The only other young victims contracted the illness after being given contaminated growth-hormone treatment.

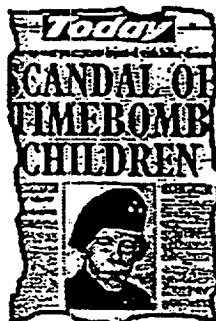
## Blue

"We asked how she could have got the disease and all the doctors said is that this sort of thing just comes out of the blue," said her mother, who has asked not to be named.

"Vicky went down hill very quickly during the summer and by the time the illness was confirmed she really did not know what was going on."

Vicky's grandmother Beryl said: "I believe it was caused by eating infected meat. Vicky lived on beef-burgers. They were her fa-

**'It was just like somebody old inside a young person's body'**



TODAY, May 13, 1991

vourite food. She ate hundreds of them, at home and in burger bars.

"She often went out with her friends for a burger.

"There must be a connection. How else could she have caught this disease?"

"She was just a normal teenager. She worked hard at school and had lots of friends. She loved horses, and spent hours at local stables, helping to muck out and look after them. Vicky is a very caring person, with a sweet and loving nature. That makes it even harder to bear."

*The signs of this deadly, untreatable disease began to creep up on Vicky last May.*

First came a dramatic weight loss. Then one day she felt slightly off-balance. It happened again. Then again ... getting more severe each time. She sud-



TODAY, Sept 2, 1993

denly got spasms of shaking which she couldn't control," says Mrs Rimmer, of Connah's Quay, North Wales.

"The spasms began to affect different parts of her body. Then she found she couldn't concentrate on school work. And her memory began to go. She would forget things.

"It was like someone old, in a young body. She began to have problems with her eyes. Before all this, she'd had perfect sight. But she suddenly developed double vision.

## Examinations

"Eventually she was sent to Walton Hospital in Liverpool. They gave her all sorts of examinations. They did not seem to know what it was.

"But then, last September, one specialist said to me, 'She has a spongiform

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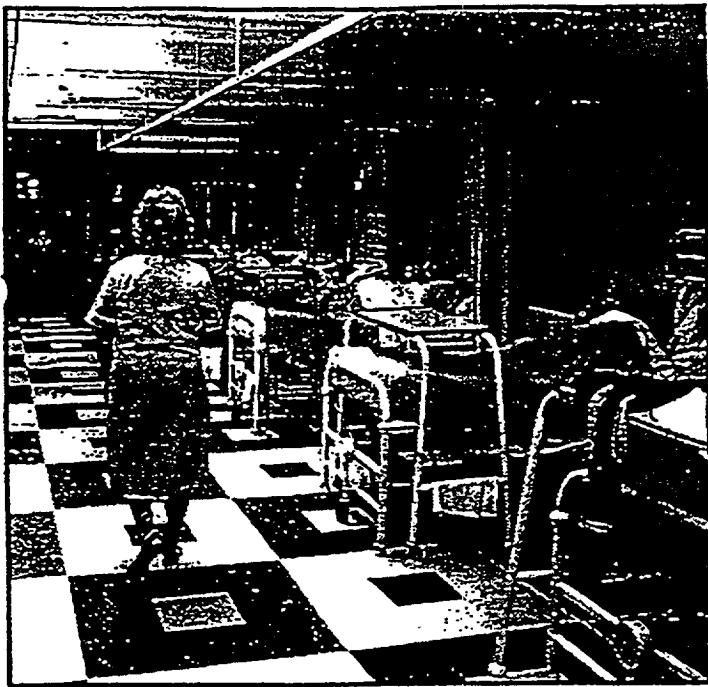
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## NEW PERIL ON THE WARDS

Britain's hospital wards could soon be seeing more youthful victims of the human form of Mad Cow Disease, says at least one scientist



encephalopathy'. That's all he said. Nothing else. It meant absolutely nothing to me.

"When I got home I rang our local doctor and he explained. It was fatal. There was no cure ..."

*Now all Mrs Rimmer can do is visit her dying grandchild, and sit with her, hour after hour. Fighting the tears. Waiting for the end.*

"I have no idea if she really understands what is going on," Mrs Rimmer says. "In many ways, I hope she doesn't.

"For the past few weeks she seems to have been in some sort of coma. I hope she doesn't know what the illness is about."

And still Mrs Rimmer can get no real explanation for Vicky's appalling plight.

"The doctors have said nothing to me," she says. "If they know something,

they've kept it from me. I want explanations, and no one has put any forward. They tell me nothing.

"I've asked whether Vicky caught this thing through eating meat. The doctors don't know - or if they do know, don't answer.

### Pressures

"Perhaps someone knows the answer but is frightened to say so. Perhaps there are too many pressures for the Government to admit what is happening."

"But if there is a risk that BSE has somehow crossed over into humans, we should all know about it.

"I want an inquiry. On behalf of every other parent and grandparent in Britain. I believe I have a right to know what's going on.

"This is killing Vicky, and it's killing me. I want

to know what the authorities know about this disease, whether they are keeping anything secret.

"I don't trust them to tell me the truth. Me, or anyone else."

*One medical expert involved in Vicky's case said yesterday that the reaction among fellow-experts was "controlled panic".*

Not one of the world's specialists in CJD has been able to say how Vicky caught the disease.

Three other people of similar age - two in America, one in France - have also contracted it.

One scientist who believes there is a link with mad cow disease is microbiologist Dr Stephen Healer, of York General Hospital.

"It is an inescapable conclusion that Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis has got into our food chain," he said. "I suspect there will be other cases involving young people.

"We may find that a new form of CJD is developing out of the cattle disease - with slightly revised symptoms, but with the same fatal effect."

Labour health spokesman David Blunkett said last night that he would raise the matter urgently in the Commons.

"The Health Minister must act now, in response to very genuine public concern," he said.

"I back the call for an independent inquiry.

*"Medical uncertainty about this disease is understandable. Political stubbornness is not."*

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