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*From the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State*

The Editor  
 Today Newspaper  
 News International  
 1 Pennington Street  
 London E1 9BS

by fax on 071 782 4819

25<sup>th</sup> January 1994

Sir,

I should be grateful if you would give as much prominence to this letter as you gave to reports in today's edition of your newspaper of a teenage girl said to be suffering from Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD).

CJD is, as your story makes clear, a dreadful disease. I can understand and sympathise with the distress of the relatives of anyone who may be suffering from it. Apart from anything else, it is almost impossible to diagnose CJD except after an autopsy on the brain. So relatives of possible sufferers have the additional distress of not knowing whether the patient is suffering from the disease.

While I can understand why you wish to report something which you may believe is evidence of a new and horrible risk to health, I do wish you had given much more prominence to the scientific facts than to the relatives' fears.

- You report the suggestion that eating hamburgers might cause CJD. No expert in the field has found evidence to support the idea that eating beef may be a cause of CJD.
- Whilst there has been speculation that there may be a link between CJD and the cattle disease Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), there is no scientific evidence of such a link; neither is there evidence of any link with scrapie, a disease of sheep which has been known for over 200 years.

I do not think you should have allowed your sympathy for very distressing circumstances to have led you to publish something which will obviously have alarmed people - and quite unnecessarily.

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Cases in which CJD is suspected are now notified to a specially designated unit run by Dr R G Will of Edinburgh. Dr Will is conducting a long term study of CJD funded by my Department. This will examine every known case and naturally will consider possible linkage with the cattle disease, although this possibility is considered to be extremely remote. In July 1993, Dr Will submitted a report to Parliament on the results of his study into the incidence of CJD in the UK, the conclusion of which was that there is currently no evidence of any change in the characteristics of CJD following the advent of BSE. This underlines what a huge distance there is between the latest scientific assessment, and the sort of speculation you reported.

In addition, an expert committee on CJD and similar diseases has been set up under the chairmanship of Dr David Tyrrell to advise the Health Departments and MAFF.

About ten months ago the Chief Medical Officer issued a statement on CJD which after emphasising that there was no scientific evidence of a causal link between BSE in cattle and CJD in humans, said that the "advice issued on 16 May 1990 by my predecessor, Sir Donald Acheson, that beef can be eaten safely by everyone, both adults and children, including patients in hospital, remains valid. The Department continues to monitor developments in this area closely and will carefully consider all new evidence as it emerges. I am confident that all necessary action has been taken to safeguard public health".

I should, as I say, be grateful if you would give this letter the same coverage as was given to your report of the teenage girl's illness. I should be very happy for any of the Department's scientists to brief journalists on CJD if you would find this helpful.

*Yours sincerely,*

*Baroness Cumberlege*

BARONESS CUMBERLEGE

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