2. The first meeting

2.1 The Working Party met for the first time on 20 June 1988. Mr Wilesmith of the CVL attended the meeting. The future timetable was discussed and it was agreed that the next meeting should be held on 10 November and that an interim Report would not be produced until early the following year. Dr Pickles subsequently noted: ‘This is a more leisurely timetable than I had in mind.’ The timetable no doubt had to accommodate the commitments of four eminent and busy men. Sir Richard explained to us that at this point they had anticipated making an interim Report but that in the event they made interim recommendations after meetings and decided that their Report should be a final one. This first meeting lasted from 10.30 a.m. to mid-afternoon, and both the minutes written by Mr Lawrence and Dr Pickles’s independent account within DH show that discussion ranged widely.

2.2 The implications of the answers provided to the key questions were considered. Discussion of Mr Wilesmith’s answer to Question 16 – on the risk of a species jump to other animals – was particularly significant, although the minutes of the meeting do not specifically record this. Dr Pickles noted, as a point made in discussion: ‘BSE is probably caused by a similar agent to that causing scrapie and CJD; but we cannot assume it is identical or will have identical transmission characteristics.’ In her witness statement she elaborated:

What was not clear was whether scrapie crossing the species barrier for the first time into cattle might be expected to be a greater or lesser potential hazard to man than BSE, either sporadic in a spontaneous form, or BSE from scrapie host-adapted after multiple passaging in cattle. Nor was it clear how either of these would compare with scrapie from sheep, or indeed BSE agent from sheep. The approach was to play safe and assume the agent could be more hazardous to man than the historical evidence had shown us scrapie in sheep had been. This was the view expressed by the Southwood Working Party, with which I agreed.

2.3 Her note records the Working Party’s concern that affected cattle, less their heads removed for analysis, were still permitted to enter the human food chain.

2.4 By the end of their first meeting the Working Party had decided to make four immediate interim recommendations. Sir Richard wrote to Mr Andrews on the following day setting these out:

(i) We believe that an expert working party on research should be established by the MRC [Medical Research Council] (possibly jointly between the MRC and the AFRC [Agriculture and Food Research Council]) to advise on the research that is in hand, and the research that is required to answer the questions that we are identifying. An urgent question for that body would be a review of the current laboratory work on the transmissibility of the agent.

26 YB88/6.20/3.3
27 YB88/6.20/2.1; YB88/6.20/3.1
28 YB88/6.20/3.1
29 S115 Pickles para. 32.4
(ii) We believe that tests should be undertaken on cattle and appropriate laboratory animals with meal known to be infective with scrapie to test the current hypothesis that this is the origin of the disease. Because of the significance of milk and meat products from cattle, because some of the early work on scrapie needs repeating and because scrapie provides a more rapid model from which early results might be expected, we would like experiments to be conducted with scrapie to test the likelihood of its transmission via milk or muscle (ie, a mutton steak).

(iii) Because of the paucity of information we believe that priority should be given to ensuring that the present field epidemiological work on transmission of the disease in cattle herds should be given priority. In practice this means that arrangements must be made to ensure that the approximately 150 offspring of cows with BSE are identified and followed (even if this involves some financial compensation for the farmers).

(iv) In the light of the potential risks, the Working Party greatly welcomes the decision to make this a notifiable disease. However, they felt it their duty to inform you that it is their considered opinion that arrangements should be put in hand to ensure that, at this stage of knowledge, the carcasses of the infective animals are condemned and destroyed by incineration or a comparable method. The removal of the head is not an adequate safeguard, they are not the only source of infection. In making this recommendation to you I am mindful of your concerns with respect to public expenditure, but I know that my colleagues would wish to join me in emphasising to you the magnitude of the potential risks involved, compared with the relatively small expenditure occasioned at this stage of the outbreak.30

2.5 According to the minutes of the meeting, the Working Party concluded that although there was no certainty that the agent could not jump the species barrier to pigs and poultry, action in relation to these species would not be recommended.

2.6 The Working Party expressed concern about biological products, both human and veterinary. Professor Epstein raised the question of the risk posed by the laboratory use of foetal calf serum. It was agreed that Dr Pickles would make enquiries into the use of bovine materials in pharmaceutical products and into health and safety aspects.31 It was noted that it would be useful to have an epidemiological flow chart to determine what bovine material was used for. It was agreed that Mr Lawrence would start preparing the ‘Interim Report’ beginning with a background review of what was known, including the routes by which animal protein was ingested by cattle, the geographical distribution of BSE cases, and the difficulties in understanding the nature of the agent.32

30 YB88/6.21/1.1
31 YB88/6.20/3.2–3.3
32 YB88/6.20/2.5