


# Quarantine and rabies

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In 1997 the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) set up an Advisory Group on Quarantine [AGQ(Rabies)] to assess the risk of the introduction of rabies into the UK under the current policy of quarantine and alternatives.

 Rabies is a viral infection of many mammals. It is transmitted to man in saliva through the bite of a rabid animal, travelling from the site of entry along peripheral nerve axons to invade the central nervous system. The disease, often starting with hydrophobia, develops into a disseminated encephalitis and is always fatal. In Asia, Africa and Latin America rabies is common in wildlife and is also often found in domestic animals. It is rare in most parts of Western Europe, where it is mainly carried by foxes. Vaccination campaigns have had a major impact in limiting the spread of wild-type rabies virus. In North America, where rabies is still endemic in wildlife, the likelihood of human exposure has greatly decreased. There is no animal rabies in the UK and the very rare human cases of rabies in the British Isles have always been acquired outside.

### The options

The AGQ(Rabies) was asked to assess the following options.

1. Maintain the existing policy whereby imported animals are housed in quarantine facilities for 6 months.
2. Reduce the length of time animals are required to spend in quarantine.
3. Allow animals into the country from EU member states or rabies-free countries when reliable assurances can be obtained relating to identification, vaccination, blood test certification and with a system of checks after entry. Those checks could be made either (a) at the point of entry or (b) away from the point of entry in accredited reception centres. Where such assurance cannot be made, animals would be quarantined as at present.
4. Give up quarantine altogether but ensure that (a) imported animals would be subjected to pre-entry vaccination and (b) all domestic cats and dogs would be vaccinated. Were the disease to be introduced, livestock and foxes in infected areas would be vaccinated.

The Working Group, chaired by Dr Ian Kennedy, Professor of Health Law, Ethics and Policy at the School of Public Policy, University College London, deliberated extensively and consulted a large number of people. The Group's paper, *The Quarantine Report* (1), was published in September 1998. A new system of quarantine was proposed which is a version of option 3. The overwhelming concern was that any new policy should **not increase** the risk of introducing rabies to this country.

### The new proposals

- Abandon the requirement for 6 months quarantine on entry to the UK for dogs and cats travelling from EEA countries (the 15 EU states plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway). The following would be required instead: (a) identify animals electronically using implanted microchips; (b) vaccinate against rabies at or above 3 months of age; (c) identify vaccination success by blood tests; (d) treat 24 hours before entry with anthelmintic drugs and against ticks.
- Maintain 6 months quarantine for animals from countries other than qualifying countries.
- Set up a reference laboratory and accredit laboratories for testing.

- Establish a database.
- Introduce the new system after the infrastructure is in place and allow 3 years for introduction.
- Monitor the new system.
- Discontinue the system of rabies quarantine for non-carnivores from qualifying countries.
- Carry out research and establish methods to distinguish rabies-infected from vaccinated animals.
- Ensure an extensive public debate.

### The arguments in favour of change

- The time is ripe for re-evaluation of the risk posed by rabies in Europe and Great Britain (2).
- EU law and policies relating to the Single Market guarantee free movement of goods and people within the EU; Britain should conform to obligations under the Treaty of Rome.
- Effective rabies vaccines are available.
- Control of rabies in wildlife reservoirs in Europe has been successful.
- Vaccination success can be checked.
- Technological advance allows safe identification of animals.
- Animal welfare groups request a reduction of stress in animals; there will also be reduction of stress in animal owners.
- Incentives for smuggling will be reduced.
- Costs to animal owners and the State will be significantly reduced.

### The arguments against the proposals

- The present system has served the UK well.
- The certification of imported animals might not be trustworthy.
- An antibody assay safely indicating the protection of animals from rabies still has to be agreed upon.
- The resources needed at ports of entry to handle an increased number of animal imports per day are substantial, do not exist at present and may incur a significant cost.
- The introduction period must be longer than the anticipated 3 years.
- The number of enquiries about dog bites might increase astronomically under the new system and may not be manageable with the present resources.

The Kennedy report (1) is at present out for consultation. The Government is, in principle, sympathetic to change along the lines recommended by the Advisory Group, provided the practical means of achieving this can be found. It is appreciated that controls against rabies are a matter of concern to many people and organizations. The consultation period closes early in 1999, after which the Government will reach a decision on change. It is my opinion that the time is ripe for change and that the advantages of changing to a system as outlined above, instituted stepwise with all due care and caution, outweigh the counter arguments.

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### Further reading

1. *The Quarantine Report* (PB 3986, £15.00 plus £1.50 p&p) is available from MAFF Publications, Admail 6000, London SW1A 2XX (Tel. 0645 556000).
2. EC Scientific Veterinary Committee, 1992 and 1997; House of Commons Agriculture Select Committee, 1994; BMA Guide on Rabies, 1995; RSPCA Report on Quarantine & Rabies, 1996; British Veterinary Association Council – Rabies & Quarantine, 1997; Quarantine for Pets, MAFF, 1997.