

14th March 2013

Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Secretary,

RE: Inquiry into beef imports in Australia

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to your Committee. In my capacity as a medical scientist with expertise in the “prion” diseases such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), I have had extensive experience with the British Government’s Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) 2000-2003; the Australian National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Case Registry, 1993-present; and the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Transmissible spongiform Encephalopathies Advisory Committee (TSEAC), 2000-2012. I have studied and published extensively on this group of diseases since 1968.

It is clearly of great importance that Australia protects its cattle population from any introduction of BSE. All Government and private agencies involved in this process of keeping Australia free of BSE have performed at the highest level to ensure risk minimization. To a large extent, we are dependent on certifications from countries of origin that their exports (and our imports) are BSE-free, but this appears to be the weak link in the chain, as illustrated recently with the widespread mis-labelling of horse meat product in Europe. Moreover, the technical difficulty in detecting BSE prions makes complete assurance of freedom of contamination very challenging. As a consequence, it would be prudent to adopt a very conservative approach when it comes to importing beef products from countries associated with endemic BSE.

From both the human health and agricultural perspectives, this group of illnesses are very complex. I would be pleased to discuss any aspects with your committee if requested to do so.

Sincerely,

Colin L. Masters MD
Executive Director, Mental Health Research Institute
Head, Mental Health Division and Executive Board Director
The Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health
Laureate Professor, The University of Melbourne