

EU COMMISSION BIOMED 2 Annual Activity Report

1. Identification:

1.1. Title of the project:

Public perceptions of BSE and CJD risk in Europe, their interplay with media, policy initiatives and surveillance issues. Drawing the lessons for information policy.

Acronym: CJDRISK

1.2. Contract number: BMH4 987028

1.3. Operative commencement date: First July 1999

1.4. Date of actual receipt of funds. 26 August 1999

1.5. Time period covered by the report: 1 July 1999 – 1 July 2000

1.6. EC project Leader

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1.7. Key words (5 maximum)

Perceptions, communication, mass-media, surveillance, CJD

Disclaimer: This report contains the results of the work of an international group of experts, and does not necessarily represent the decisions or the stated policy of the World Health Organization.

2. Scientific progress report:

2.1 Interim results and achievements (milestones).

The project has been successfully implemented, and is overall proceeding according to schedule. Tasks 1, 2 and 3 are well advanced, tasks 4 and 5 have been delayed for a few months to be able to make use of the findings from the first tasks in the methods (framework assumptions) considered in the last two tasks.

During this first year all research partners met twice. Once at the end of the 3rd month in St Albans (UK) when agreements regarding the various tasks and outputs were made, and at the 10th month in Rome (Italy), when first results were presented and discussed. An additional small meeting of task three members was organised in London on the 6th month to facilitate the development of analytical procedures for the task (media analysis).

Results:

Task 1:

Aims: To investigate lay perceptions of BSE-related risk, how these are socially constructed, if and how social setting impacts on perceptions of risk.

To inform the other tasks in the project, and particularly tasks 4 and 5, and explore the feasibility of developing indicators of public perceptions of BSE related risk.

Methods: Qualitative focus group discussions with natural groups who socialize outside the research setting, are the data collection method being used.

The protocol for conducting the focus groups was piloted in all countries and revised on the basis of the pilot results. The protocol adopted following adaptation is attached in Annex 1 (first technical deliverable of task 1).

A proposed list of key thematic headings for the coding and analysis of the focus group data was developed (Annex 2, second technical deliverable of task 1). These thematic headings are based on initial analysis of FGD transcripts from the UK, and summaries from other countries. The data has been examined for key concepts underlying participants' accounts. Feedback will be used to modify and finalize the thematic headings.

The analysis of the data is being carried out inductively, through a close reading of the focus group transcripts. Rather than trawling the transcripts for illustrative examples of pre-existing models of risk attitudes, the analysis protocol is designed to facilitate the development of more grounded models, which reflect the ways in which people conceptualise risk assessment in everyday life.

The focus group discussions conducted so far are listed below, the remaining ones will be carried out before December 2000.

Group	UK	Italy	Germany	Finland
Family food purchasers	1 in London and 1 in Storrington, West Sussex	1 in Trento 1 in Naples	1 in Kiel	Two FGDs
Adolescents	1 in London	1 in Trento 1 in Bologna		1 FGD
Older people 55+	1 in Bessels Green, Kent	1 in Trento 1 in Bologna	1 in Kiel	Two FGDs
Young singles	1 in London	1 in Bologna 1 in Naples		

Ranking Exercises were designed to stimulate discussion and to enable people to start thinking about the issues surrounding food safety and BSE, for instance to identify what the key components of “risk”, “safety” and “health” are for them. As such, they have proved effective. Few groups have reached a clear consensus about how “safe” different groups of food are, but the discussion provoked by these tasks has provided insights into the ways in which people conceptualize and negotiate different kinds of “risk”.

Perceptions of BSE: For the majority of groups, BSE is not a major concern and was not mentioned until prompted by facilitators. For some the ‘BSE crisis’ was a historical issue, although for those with personal experience of farming communities expressed view that risk had been exaggerated. Few cited BSE cited as a cause of behavioural change.

Trust in experts: Participants in all groups were ‘routinely sceptical’ of government sources when asked explicitly. For many groups, trusted sources were those with no vested interests e.g. consumer organisations. These were most often mentioned explicitly. Implicitly, ‘local’ was the main dimension of trust, with familiarity, personal experience and known others being trusted. However, others who shared the characteristics of known others were trusted by extension - for instance, organic shops, or the market traders. One issue for UK participants is that ‘experts’ cannot be trusted because they change their minds about food risks and this is seen to undermine their credibility.

Some common emerging themes:

Safety as a function of locality. For many participants this was expressed as greater faith in food which had least far to travel.

Provenance. Food with a known or trusted provenance was generally safer than other food. To some extent this overlapped with local produce – if it was local (e.g. beef from local butcher in the neighbourhood), it was trusted. It would be useful to explore this issue of ‘provenance’ in detail, to establish how it is inferred, and in what contexts it is cited as a aid to decision making.

General discourses of food safety. For all groups, 'risk' was submerged under other preferred discourses for food choice – e.g. nutrition, health, food for socialising. Some dimensions which could be explored further include: responsibility for safety (e.g. for producing 'safe' food, for preparing 'safe' food) and the different situations in which this is mentioned as an issue; how various 'frames' for thinking about food relate to each other.

Natural. Although many participants from all groups identify natural foods (those with least processing before they reach the kitchen) as healthiest, there are also elements of faith in technology in some groups (e.g. food for babies) as improving and ensuring quality. Also, foods can be too close to nature –family food purchasers identified free range chickens and pigs as potential risks because 'you didn't know where they had been'. Again, in analysis it would be useful to identify how and when ideas of 'naturalness' are brought into discussion, and how they intersect with other dimensions of food quality and safety.

The role of monitoring and regulation. For some, there is greater faith in foods which are heavily monitored (e.g. baby food again). The degree of faith in the monitoring systems of non-local producers and distributors is interesting – e.g. the EU, the systems of countries from which food is imported.

Task 2:

Aims: To estimate public knowledge and awareness of the BSE crisis, exposure to mass media messages concerning BSE, degree of reception, sources of information; how individuals perceive the crisis and its implications; behaviour modification, trust in different sources.

Methods: A review of findings and when possible a secondary analysis of information collected in quantitative sample surveys and of other information drawn from statistical sources

Guidelines were circulated to each country research team with criteria for identifying relevant surveys in the country (Annex 3).

Interim results: Existing data sets and surveys carried out from 1985 in the four participating countries have been identified via searches of academic data bases, data archives, websites of relevant institutions in both public and private sector. The availability of data sets for acquisition and further analysis has been ascertained, although in many cases this information has proved difficult to obtain. A list of the relevant research according to the required characteristics has been compiled (Annex 4 and 5, technical deliverables 1 and 2 of task 2). This is now with the task leader who will in the coming months carry out the secondary analyses.

There are many relevant data sets in the UK (26 studies) and Germany (40 studies), much less in Italy (11 studies), and very few in Finland. These data sets come from market research companies and opinion polls, government commissioned research, academic research, and meat consumption data.

Market research: Most of the market research identified dates from the last few years and it has proved extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify any earlier work that may be of interest. This is because there is no central index or database of market research in any of the countries, and individual companies appear to archive their work erratically, if at all, many simply destroy the data after a couple of years of the survey has elapsed. Company websites contain much useful information, but very little predating c.1995. It is has also been difficult to gain more than general details regarding sampling, questionnaires and findings. Overall the availability of market research data sets for further analysis is both limited and costly.

In the UK 11 market research surveys were identified; in Italy results from four can be accessed and there is no access to others; and in Germany a couple of market research companies in Germany could make some of their data available, and the one study accessible from Finland is a market research one.

Government and academic research: In the UK several government-commissioned surveys have been identified. These are much more accessible and at a reasonable cost from the University of Essex Data Archive. Several of these contain some information of potential interest. These data sets include quantitative data on meat consumption, for instance from the UK National Food Survey.

Academic research on these issues is surprisingly limited in the UK with only a few attitudinal surveys identified in the literature. Many of these are based on theoretical models drawn from social psychology, such as the theory of reasoned action.

In Germany the data bases from several studies done by the Kiel University can be used for re-analysis, but those done by others are not available.

Only a couple of relevant academic researchers focusing on Italy were identified and their raw data cannot be obtained.

A couple of comparative studies include samples in Italy, Germany and the UK and can be re-analysed, including, “quality policy and consumer behaviour” (EC funded), Measurement of consumer attitudes and their choice in food acceptability (AIR-CAT, also EC funded).

EUROBAROMETER questions over the relevant period were reviewed and a number of them were considered relevant for the purpose of this research. They are being obtained for reanalysis.

The re-analysis of secondary data from comparative studies and review of published literature is being done by the task leader, who will also prepare the report with the findings from the re-analyses and review of published literature.

Task 3:

Aims: To describe coverage of the BSE issue in the media, compare these findings to those from tasks 1 and 2 (public perceptions, attitudes, behaviour, and trust in information sources); propose indicators of public perception amongst media sampled information; evaluation of the feasibility of using information from media sampling as part of health and risk factor surveillance systems.

Methods: media analysis, through sampling of press from national quality and popular press backwards to 1985, to analyse content, identify the framing and language used to cover the BSE issues, the intensity of media coverage and the unfolding career of the issue.

Activities carried out so far:

A procedure to assess the intensity of coverage of BSE/CJD issue since 1985 has been established. This measure will report all references to BSE/CJD in a sub-sample of the national press over the period 1985-99 after cleaning irrelevant references such as 'BSE' standing for 'Breast Self-Examination'.

For the purpose of content analysis a common coding frame was established among the four participant countries. This was done first in discussions at the St Albans meeting, secondly through e-mail exchanges on draft proposals and finally at a small meeting in January 2000 in London.

The London meeting also served to evaluate pilot work of the four participant countries. Each partner had tested the coding frame on a number of press articles. The coding frame was revised in the light of these comments.

Coding reliability was measured in each country and across the four countries in a defined sample size and rotating according to language skills of team members.

A sampling procedure for the content analysis was adopted to yield at least 600 articles per country. In the UK 1500 articles were used due to high coverage of the issue.

All teams are now coding, and are expected to complete the data collection phase by the end of Summer 2000.

The technical deliverables mentioned above are attached in Annex 6 and 7. National reports are included in Annex 8a and 8b for UK, 9 for Italy and 10 for Germany, and contain tables with quantitative findings but their interpretation has not yet been completed.

Preliminary Information:

In the UK content analysis was performed over a sub-sample of broadsheets and tabloids, dailies and Sunday editions, considering newspapers that had on-line accessibility.

Four papers were chosen for content analysis among those with largest circulation, two broadsheets (Telegraph and The Guardian) and two tabloids (Mirror and Mail). The selected key newspapers constituted the 42% of the total on-line population of article and had a similar distribution over time.

Italy: two daily (Il Sole-24 Ore and Corriere della Sera), that can be accessed electronically were selected; the remaining daily newspaper which can be accessed in this way, “La Stampa”, cannot be considered a national newspaper.

There were no articles in the newspapers sampled in the years 1992, 1993 and 1994 in Italy. It is assumed that coverage in preceding years, when no on-line data is available, was also nil or extremely rare and inconsequential.

In Italy there are no daily newspapers that are “popular” or of a “tabloid” nature; but this type of press is easier to find among weekly or monthly periodicals. An extensive search in its full-text database based on the same text strings used for the retrieval of articles from the electronic newspaper archives, identified 60 articles in popular press, including women’s magazines and popular science periodicals. Content analysis will include all 28 articles from “**L’Espresso**” and “**Panorama**” (the two leading newsweeklies), “**Oggi**” (a weekly magazine with a popular orientation), and “**Venerdì**” (a weekly magazine supplement to the daily newspaper “La Repubblica”).

In Germany analyses included two nationwide daily newspapers: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Frankfurter Rundschau; two regional daily newspapers: General-Anzeiger Bonn and Berliner Zeitung; two news-magazines: Spiegel and Focus.

In Finland four quality papers have been included in the study. Two of them have been followed 1985-1999, two on shorter period. There are no BSE articles in Finnish press before 1990 and only a few before 1996. The news database produced only 10-20% of the hits comparing to the manual search in quality newspapers. All the 400 articles identified manually had their content analysed. The Finnish media database “News” produced no hits on tabloids included in the database, and tabloids were therefore not included.

Tasks 4 and 5:

A draft proposal for the policy analysis, task 5 was discussed at the second meeting of researchers (Annex 11). It was decided to revise the proposal in order to reflect better the specific focus of the research, i.e. to focus further on information policy. It was also decided to employ a similar methodology for tasks 4 and 5, regarding the interviews with key informants, and the analyses of results. A new methodological outline is being developed and circulated among involved researchers.

2.2. Which objectives have been reached and which have not?

The milestones anticipated for this first year for tasks 1, 2 and 3 were all achieved, those for tasks 4 and 5 were slightly delayed to allow inclusion of results from first tasks and those for task 3 slightly brought forward.

The external advisory committee could not meet, due to last minute impediments to some members. They all showed interest in the project and in being involved. One of the members participated to the second meeting and contributed with useful comments, but no changes were suggested. Other members were requested to make written comments, and will be invited again to meet researchers at the third meeting to make comments about further potential analyses of the data.

2.3. No objectives or milestones have been modified.

2.4. All participants have been actively involved.

Dr Liz Dowler from the LSHTM group moved to Warwick University, but made internal arrangements and remains completely involved in the project. One of the junior researchers of the Kiel University team spent some time with the LSE team to become more familiar with some of the research tools used.

2.5. Has the originally proposed timetable been followed? If not explain.

The original timetable is been followed quite well, tasks 4 and 5 are somewhat delayed but should catch up during this second year.

2.6. No recommendations from last years project review board, this is the first year of the project.

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4.3. Participating SMEs: None

4.4. Total number of teams:
6 teams, each a contractor (LSE, LSHTM, University of Kiel, University of Bologna, University of Kuopio, WHO).

4.5. Members of the Project Management Group.
Carlos Dora, Martin Bauer, Reimar von Alvensleben, Timo Russanen, Liz Dowler, Pier Paolo Giglioli,
Members of Steering Committee: the above plus Erik Millstone.