

60,000 may have human variant of mad cow disease

Lois Rogers

MORE than one in every 1,000 people may be carrying the human form of mad cow disease, raising fears of a second wave of victims.

New research suggests that, 15 years after a mass cull of British cattle, almost 60,000 people over the age of 15 unknowingly have new variant Creutzfeldt Jakob disease (vCJD).

Campaigners say the findings prove vCJD remains a threat and that the scaling back of research and support is a mistake. Gill Turner, of the CJD Support Network, said: "Most people think CJD has gone away but these findings prove it hasn't."

The statistics emerged from a project to test 30,000 appendixes removed in operations between 2000 and 2011. In interim findings on 13,878 samples published by the Health Protection Agency, four vCJD cases were identified, an infection rate of 288 cases per million. An earlier study, published in a neurology journal, found the chemical analysis employed might identify only a quarter of cases, raising the possibility of a true infection rate of 1,152 per million.

Although vCJD can be transmitted through blood transfusions and via surgical instruments, those under 15, who make up about 18% of the population, are far less likely to be affected because they were born after the cull took place. If the predictions prove correct, one in 867 of the remaining population of 51.2m could be infected. The death toll from vCJD stands at 172. It can take 50 years for symptoms to emerge.

Activists say the disbanding of the spongiform encephalopathy advisory committee (SEAC), which was monitoring the

condition, this year and passing its functions to the health department's advisory committee on dangerous pathogens is indicative of a lack of official interest.

Peter Mills, 61, a company director from Pickering, North Yorkshire, whose daughter Holly, 25, is suffering from progressive brain damage after being diagnosed with vCJD in 2003, said: "We knew the appendix monitoring project would show the scale of future problems but the official attitude is to kick it all into the long grass."



Mills: victim of vCJD

John Collinge, professor of neurology at University College London and a former member of SEAC, said it was not known how sensitive to the test vCJD was during incubation but blood donors would almost certainly have included those with the disease. He said: "I don't think people would accept that level of risk of being infected with HIV or hepatitis. I am surprised this finding has not triggered more action."

Azra Ghani, professor of infectious disease epidemiology at Imperial College London, urged restraint. "It's a waiting game with any new infection," she said. "We just don't know if these people will be infectious or not."