

By email

23 October 2007

Reference:

Dear Sir or Madam

**FOOD SAFETY INCIDENT: SLAUGHTER OF SHEEP TREATED FOR SHEEP SCAB BEFORE EXPIRY OF THE REQUIRED WITHDRAWAL PERIOD**

I am writing on behalf of the Food Standards Agency and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to alert you to an ongoing food safety incident and to ask you in turn to alert your members / colleagues to the problem, and to seek your help in taking appropriate action to prevent a recurrence of the incident.

Background

An abattoir in Wales recently bought up consignments of sheep from a number of auction marts held in the north of England. Such auction marts were being held specifically for breeding sheep, and we understand that one of the requirements for entering sheep into such sales is that they have been recently treated with an authorised veterinary medicinal product to combat the spread of sheep scab. The local Trading Standards Officer for the auction marts in question became suspicious when he learnt that a buyer representing an abattoir bought up significant quantities of sheep. He alerted the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) at the abattoir in question.

The sheep in question had been treated with a range of different product. Some of these were dips or pour-ons, but a significant number of the sheep had been treated with injectable Dectomax (doramectin). Some of the treatments had withdrawal periods ranging from 35 days (dips) to 70 days (injectable Dectomax). As a result, many of the sheep from these consignments were slaughtered only a week to 2 weeks after treatment, and well before the expiry of the statutory withdrawal period.

From a legal basis, putting into the food chain meat derived from animals treated with a veterinary medicinal product in advance of the expiry of the statutory withdrawal period is contrary to the Animals and Animal Products (Examination for Residues and Maximum Residue Limits) Regulations 1997 (as amended). More importantly, the meat in question also poses risks to consumer health.

The main food safety concern associated with such meat arises from those sheep treated with the injectable product. This is because meat from around the injection

sites will contain residues of the active substance at concentrations above the statutory Maximum Residue Limit. Although the likelihood of consumers eating meat from around such injection sites is likely to be small, consumption of meat from such areas could give rise to adverse effects in consumers. Concerns around doramectin relate to exposure that has caused sickness and other effects in laboratory animals.

The MHS Official Veterinary Surgeon at the abattoir in question was able to detain and oversee the destruction of one whole consignment of several hundred treated sheep. Further consignments of sheep treated for scab were slaughtered prior to this issue being discovered and the meat from such animals has been distributed into the food chain. In line with advice from the FSA, the abattoir operator has initiated the urgent withdrawal of such meat from the market. We know that large quantities of such meat have been supplied to the supermarket chain ASDA, who have now withdrawn the meat from sale [<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2007/oct/lamb>]. FSA is also trying to trace and arrange the withdrawal of similarly affected product supplied by the abattoir to other food businesses

Although we have no evidence to suggest that the practice of buying store / breeding animals and sending them straight to slaughter is widespread, I hope you will agree that it is vital to take appropriate steps to protect consumer health by ensuring that further such incidents do not occur. Such action will also help ensure that consumer confidence in British meat is not undermined.

#### Action required

I am asking you to bring this matter urgently to the attention of your members / colleagues who are involved in the production, marketing, selling, and processing of sheep. Please remind them, in particular, that animals that have been treated with a veterinary medicinal product may only be slaughtered for human consumption after the statutory withdrawal period has been fully observed. Food business operators have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring this happens (in this case, abattoir operators) but others in the food chain etc also have a part to play.

I would also ask operators of livestock markets to be vigilant. It is important that sheep or other animals from breeding auctions are not sent directly for slaughter. This applies where they are known still to be in the statutory withdrawal period, or where their residues status is unclear. Wherever possible, purchasers should be reminded that treated animals may only be slaughtered for human consumption once the statutory withdrawal period has ended. If a slaughterhouse is the intended destination, purchasers should be made aware that the withdrawal period may not yet have expired.

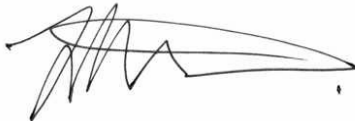
Trading Standards Officers present at livestock auctions are also asked to be vigilant, particularly where large quantities of breeding animals may be being bought up by meat processing companies. In such instances, the MHS Official Veterinary Surgeon at the meat plant concerned should be notified, or the matter reported to the FSA at the contact point given below.

Abattoir operators should ensure that all animals bought at breeding / store auction marts and presented for slaughter fully comply with the rules on withdrawal periods for veterinary medicinal products. MHS Official Veterinary Surgeons are being asked to be alert to this problem and to ensure that animals not complying with relevant rules are not slaughtered for human consumption.

If anyone has any information about recent consignments of sheep which may not have been fully compliant with the relevant rules, please notify Drazenka Tubin-Delic, Incidents Response Branch, FSA at the address below as soon as possible. (Drazenka's telephone number is 0207 276 8450; fax 0207 276 8446; email [Drazenka.Tubin-Delic@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Drazenka.Tubin-Delic@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk)).

If you have any queries about the contents of this letter, do please get in touch with me or with Drazenka (as above).

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Foster', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Tim Foster  
Primary Production Division