

# STATE OF COLORADO

Bill Owens, Governor  
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*Dedicated to protecting and improving the health and environment of the people of Colorado*

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Colorado Department  
of Public Health  
and Environment

February 22, 2002

Dear Colleagues,

This letter is to inform you of a surveillance project being conducted by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) for human transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). National interest in TSE increased with the 1996 report of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) in Great Britain associated with exposure to bovine spongiform encephalopathy. That causal association has prompted CDPHE to evaluate the potential human health risks associated with exposure to animal TSE endemic to Colorado; scrapie in sheep and, particularly, chronic wasting disease (CWD) of deer and elk.

CDPHE has taken several steps to enhance surveillance for human TSE and to assist clinicians and coroners in establishing a diagnosis of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) or other human TSE. Although current scientific and epidemiological evidence argue against a human risk from scrapie and CWD, and human exposure to infectious tissue (brain, spinal cord, eye, spleen, lymph nodes) from these species is felt to be very limited, the accumulated evidence is insufficient to completely exclude a health risk. Thus, we are attempting to identify, investigate and characterize all cases of human TSE in Colorado.

To accomplish this goal, the Colorado Board of Health made human TSE a reportable disease in 1998. CDPHE has developed partnerships to evaluate, perform autopsies and analyze pathological specimens on suspect TSE cases. Information on how to access these services for your patients follows.

A primary surveillance goal is to identify and evaluate patients with a non-focal, rapidly progressive neurological disease who have a history of potential exposure to CWD through hunting or consumption of deer/elk meat. To accomplish this goal, CDPHE is working with Alan Anderson, MD, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center (UCHSC) Neurology Clinic. Dr. Anderson is available for consultation and will accept patient referrals for evaluation that meet specified criteria. As part of the continuum of care, post-mortem autopsy and pathological examination of these patients is assured. Please refer to the accompanying page on referral criteria and how to contact Dr. Anderson for consultation.

The National Prion Disease Pathology Surveillance Center, Case Western Reserve University was created in 1997 with grants from the National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It was created to serve as a national reference center and provide free diagnostic and pathological services for suspect TSE cases. Some of the tests offered include the presence of 14-3-3 protein in cerebral spinal fluid, determination of polymorphism at codon 129, examination of brain tissue for spongiform changes and typing of the protease-resistant prion protein. As the Center provides a central collection point for data on these rare diseases, CDPHE encourages specimens from any suspect human TSE cases be submitted for evaluation. A comprehensive description of the Center's activities and protocols for submitting specimens can be obtained at: <http://www.cjdsurveillance.com/>.

One obstacle to confirming a diagnosis of prion disease has been arranging the post-mortem removal of the brain for examination due to the potential risks involved in this procedure. CDPHE has made arrangements with Drs. Robert Kurtzman and Dean Havlik, The Pathology Group, P.C., Grand Junction to conduct brain removals and send appropriate specimens to the National Prion Center for examination. Additionally, we have some limited funding to defray the costs of autopsy and transporting the body. We can assist with arrangements and pay for autopsies on patients with clinical and diagnostic evidence supporting a prion disease diagnosis or with a non-focal, rapidly degenerative neurological disease of undetermined etiology and a significant history of exposure to elk or deer.

To arrange for the referral of a patient to the UCHSC for evaluation please contact Dr. Anderson directly as per the attached protocol. To report a human TSE case or discuss arrangements for a post-mortem autopsy contact John Pape, CDPHE, at 303-692-2628 or <[john.pape@state.co.us](mailto:john.pape@state.co.us)>. Any suggestions or comments on this surveillance project are appreciated.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

John Pape, Epidemiologist  
Communicable Disease Epidemiology Program

Ken Gershman, MD, MPH, Program Manager

Cc: Dr. Ermias Belay, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention  
Dr. Pierluigi Gambetti, Director, National Prion Disease Pathology Surveillance Center