

Request to [Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee](#) 29th Jan 2016

The Sheep Dip Sufferers Support group would like to request an EFRA inquiry into the health problems caused by sheep dip.

We help all those affected by organophosphates used in agriculture and through the years there have been many different sources: crop-protection insecticides, grain-bin fumigants, pour-on warblecides (especially those used in MAFF's compulsory warble fly eradication scheme in 1970's and 80's) but as the name suggests the biggest single group are those who have been exposed to sheep dip with many well-documented cases.

Most cases date from MAFF's 1976-92 compulsory dipping scheme enforced to combat sheep scab [which seemed to have peaked in the early 1990s as the damage from OP exposure is cumulative]. Since then dipping has been optional and been made safer by the most toxic products being taken off the market, better packaging, better protective clothing and greater awareness of the dangers (the products are only available to those who have attained a certificate of competence).

However there has never been any official acknowledgment that anyone has ever been affected. Instead DEFRA speak of "[sheep farmers who believe their health has been seriously compromised as a result of dipping sheep](#)" or "[farmers who associate their illness to sheep dip](#)". This could be for legal reasons since at the time they were dipping under Ministry supervision and maybe anxious to avoid liability but an unintended consequence is anyone affected finds it very hard to get treatment for a condition which does not officially exist; there is very little help available on the NHS and most are dependent on private health care they can ill-afford.

After such a passage of time there can be no prospect of claims for compensation (there was an unsuccessful attempt at a class action against the manufacturers over a decade ago which was struck out) so by now it ought to be possible for a formal inquiry to set the record straight.

The questions we would like to see answered are:

- 1) How many people were affected? (we made our own attempt at answering that below (1))
- 2) In 1991 Guy's hospital poisons Unit confirmed about a dozen cases of sheep dip poisoning but they were never followed up, what were the long-term effects? (2)
- 3) Many more cases were referred to Guys for testing in 1992 but the patients never got their results, what happened to them? (3)
- 4) Was compulsory dipping halted in 1992 because MAFF had become aware of health effects? (4)

5) Has DEFRA been mislead MPs whenever they have taken up a case on behalf of a constituent? (5)

yours sincerely

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(1) In the early 1990s there were over 44m sheep in the UK in over 90,000 flocks. Many farms shared communal dips but at dipping time each would typically send two sheep-handlers or more per flock so number of people dipping was probably over 180,000.

A survey by the NFU of their members in the South West found 34% reporting effects of ill-health after dipping, a smaller survey in Cumbria reported 40% but if the SW was representative of the country as a whole it suggests 60,000 people may have been affected.

Farmers were requested to report any adverse reaction to dipping to MAFF/VMD but most didn't. In 1992 HSE carried out a survey to investigate the level of under-reporting, they inspected 696 farms and found 160 cases of ill-health which would suggest around 13,700 cases nationwide. Of these only 3 had been reported to MAFF who in total received [529](#), if the level of under-reporting was consistent it suggests total cases at that time may have been around 28,000.

(2) [In 1991 the National poisons unit analysed blood samples 29 from dippers on behalf of MAFF/VMD](#) confirming diagnosis of OP poisoning in 10 cases (as reported on BBC's Countryfile [here](#)). It would be instructive to know how their health has been in the last 25 years. One of them (case number 10 on page 17) explained the long-term effects on his health to George Eustace last November and he seemed persuaded by the evidence. The lead researcher on that project was Dr Virginia Murray, now [Prof Virginia Murray](#), who can be contacted at Virginia.Murray@phe.gov.uk She has not worked at Guys since 2003 and the poisons unit itself was shut down in 2007 so has no access to her old data.

(3) Following requests to do so many more farmers volunteered for testing in 1992 but never got their results (and indeed any reference to these tests seemed to get mislaid in many GP surgeries across the country). It was presumed all such records from this time were lost but after months of requests some were found at Guys after getting special clearance. Are there more? (and why does it require special clearance?)

(4) Compulsory dipping was suddenly halted on [June 8 1992](#) , the Ministry have always denied it was on health and safety grounds but no other credible reason has ever been given and may be helpful if EFRA could have sight of the correspondence mentioned in a parliamentary question [6 days earlier](#).

(5) Through the years many MPs have been sympathetic to the plight of affected constituents though on writing to DEFRA get back a standard reply that “Independent advice based on the current scientific knowledge is that a link between chronic ill-health and exposure to OPs has not been proven” and if symptoms do exist they are "minor and subtle". These quotes from the [COT report](#) which in its first paragraph makes it clear its conclusions are specific to doses at level insufficient to produce acute effects. In most cases the constituent had made clear to their MP, and subsequently by the MP to DEFRA, that they did experience acute effects at the time (typically collapsed and been unable to stand on the day after dipping) so it is quite misleading to refer to the COT report and quote phrases like "minor and subtle".

It has seemed quite often as though the Minister has been misinformed by his own officials. An example of that was in last year's Westminster Hall debate when George Eustace said (seemingly in good faith - three times) that a HSE'S 1990 survey had been published (later re-explained in a [parliamentary answer](#)) when a glance [at the cover](#) would show it was never intended for publication.

There were legitimate reasons for not publishing that report (the products on sale at the time in metal containers could soon degrade into the basics for a chemical weapon and there are a lot of people I don't want to become aware of that).

The important question is did the Ministry act on its findings at the time and I believe they did. Within weeks manufacturers had been instructed to take phenols out of products and repackaged into chemically resistant containers. New safety guidelines were introduced and [stickers](#) issued to put on any part-used cans. Compulsory dipping was halted and 'dip or be prosecuted' were replace with ones that said 'don't dip unless necessary'.

The one thing the Ministry has not yet done is acknowledge many farmers' health did suffer, and continues to suffer, which makes it very hard for them to access the health care they urgently need.