Press release – 27 July 2021

Work on prions temporarily suspended in French public research laboratories

In agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, the general directorates of ANSES, CEA, CNRS, INRAE and Inserm have together decided to suspend all their research and experimentation on prion diseases for a period of three months.

This precautionary measure is due to the discovery of a possible new case of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease[1] (CJD) in a person who worked in a prion research laboratory.

The suspension period, which is effective as of today, will be used to investigate the possibility of a link between the observed case and the person's former job and to modify, if necessary, the preventive measures in force in the research laboratories.

The person suffering from CJD (the form of which is not yet known) is a retired INRAE employee. This could be the second case of infectious CJD in a scientist who worked on prions, following the death in 2019 of an assistant engineer who had been injured during an experiment in 2010.

Following this death, the Ministries of Research and Agriculture had undertaken a general inspection mission in July 2019 in French laboratories handling prions. Their report, submitted in October 2020, concluded that the laboratories visited were in compliance with the regulations and that there was a culture of risk management within the research teams.

Research on prion proteins, which is of great public health importance, is leading to major advances in understanding how these infectious pathogens function, and is contributing to results that can be transferred to other related degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

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[1] Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) is a prion disease. These rare diseases, also known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs), are characterised by rapid and fatal degeneration of the central nervous system. They are caused by the accumulation in the brain of a normally expressed but misfolded protein – the prion protein – which leads to the formation of aggregates that are harmful to neurons. There is currently no treatment that can change the course of these diseases. CJD can be sporadic (the most frequent form), genetic or of infectious origin following contamination. https://www.inserm.fr/information-en-sante/dossiers-information/maladies-prions-maladie-creutzfeldt-jakob

Regular, transparent information will be provided by each institution to all working communities affected by this measure.

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