



15 June 2010

# Press Release

## Review published of major outbreak of *E. coli* O157 in Surrey, 2009

The report of the independent investigation into the large outbreak of *E. coli* O157 at Godstone Farm in Surrey, the factors that contributed to it and its subsequent handling, has been published today.

The investigation, which was led by Professor George Griffin, Professor of Infectious Diseases and Medicine at St George's, University of London, was commissioned by the Health Protection Agency.

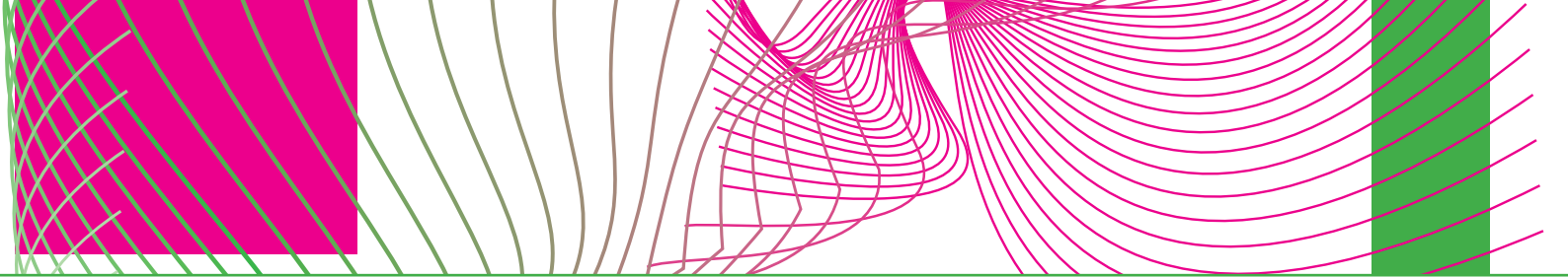
The aim of Professor Griffin and his team was to review the outbreak and make recommendations to reduce the risk of visitors to open farms contracting *E. coli* O157 and to improve the health protection response to future outbreaks of this infection.

Launching the report, Professor Griffin said: 'The outbreak of *E. coli* O157 that occurred at Godstone Farm in August and September 2009 was the largest to have occurred in the UK linked to an open farm. A total of 93 people were affected, 76 of whom were children under the age of 10.

'I was asked to lead an independent investigation into this outbreak by Justin McCracken, the HPA's Chief Executive, because he was concerned that the response to the outbreak had been slow and also that there were wider issues which needed critical examination.'

### **The key recommendations of the report are:**

- Farm operators should ensure that the layout and design of public areas on the farm are such that visitor contact with animal faecal matter (particularly ruminant) is minimised or eliminated;
- There is a need to raise public awareness of the potential infection risks when arriving at a farm attraction, emphasising the parents'/carers' decision to allow children to have animal contact;
- There should be reassessment of the risk of *E. coli* O157 infection as 'low'. Its probability may be low but the impact is high and the consequences very severe;
- An Approved Code of Practice should be developed for the open farm industry, involving relevant authorities and in close consultation with leading representatives of the industry to underpin the industry's initiative in establishing an accreditation scheme;
- The regulatory agencies and others involved should explore ways of working together in regulating open farms, clarifying roles, responsibilities and relationships;
- Research should be done on the following topics: development of rapid diagnostic tests for *E. coli* O157; the identification and treatment of children who develop severe complications of the infection; the use of vaccines against the organism in animals.



Professor Griffin continued: 'This outbreak could very likely have been avoided if more attention had been given to preventing visitors being exposed to animal faecal matter. Once it had started, there is no doubt that even with prompt action this would have been a big outbreak. Nevertheless there was a lack of public health leadership by the Health Protection Agency and a missed opportunity to exercise decisive public health action and thereby restrict the size of the outbreak.'

'The assessment of risk carried out by Godstone Farm was inadequate and it principally relied on the actions of the public, primarily through handwashing, to control the risks. The risk assessment process used by the Local Authority did not facilitate the identification of hazards on the farm despite a programme of inspections.'

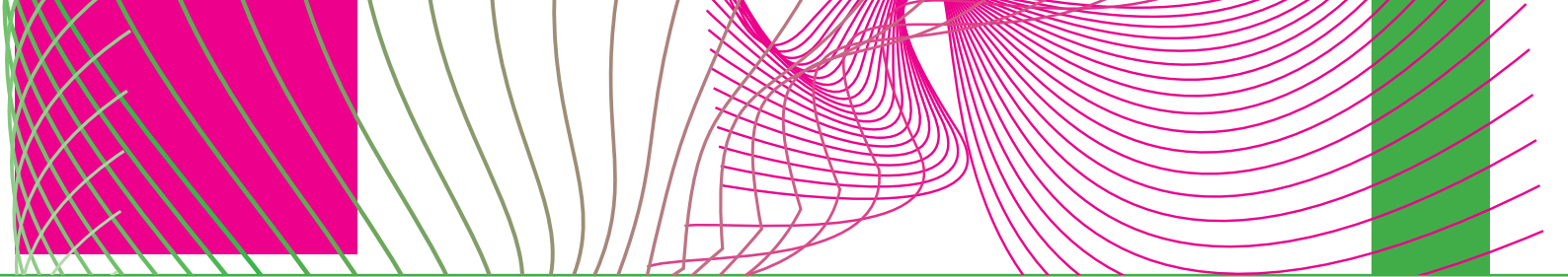
'In light of the exceptional size of the Godstone farm outbreak and the severity of complications in the children there is now a case for the HSE, together with the Local Authorities Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS) to revisit the current risk assessment so that it reflects the high impact and serious nature of *E. coli* O157 infection.'

'It is currently very difficult for families to make their own informed decisions about the risk of visiting an open farm and better public education is crucial. In addition to public education on the risks of infection from *E. coli* O157, an accreditation scheme, led by the farming industry and informed by the regulators, would help the public identify which farm premises were operated to a known and acceptable standard.'

'There will undoubtedly be a continuation of the trend towards diversification of farms, and particularly an increase in the number of open farms with public access. In the context of what happened at Godstone, a new framework for the future which is explicit and unambiguous rather than generic has been asked for by a number of local authorities and farm operators and is clearly needed. In the committee's view this is essential for the protection of the public and the development of a safe industry.'

'Farm operators must base their risk assessments and any preventative or remedial actions on the assumption that *E. coli* O157 is present on the farm. A risk management approach which relies primarily on handwashing to prevent risk of infection is, in our view, misdirected. Control measures should primarily focus on preventing visitor contact with animal faeces or faecal matter. Handwashing is a very important measure in preventing infection and is the way in which visitors can protect themselves.'

'To minimise visitor contact with animal faeces or faecal matter, we have identified specific issues that should be addressed as a matter of urgency. These could form the basis of an agreed code of good practice within the industry. Farm layout and design are critical to reducing the risk of infection.'



Professor Griffin concluded: 'The legal and institutional framework for protection of human health and the prevention of disease outbreaks in this country is complex. Currently four separate streams of legislation apply to health hazards that may be present at open farms covering public health, food safety, animal health and health and safety at work.

'We have made quite a number of recommendations for the HPA, HSE, LACORS and others to take forward. We are confident the implementation team will address the issues which have come to light during our investigation.

'We are very grateful to these bodies for their co-operation during this investigation and in particular to those parents who have contributed through our open sessions and in writing – their perspective has been critical in helping us to frame an approach which, if followed, should help protect the country from such a large outbreak on an open farm in future.'

#### Notes to Editors

1. Members of the independent investigation team were:

Professor George Griffin (chair), Professor of Infectious Diseases and Medicine at St George's, University of London, a practising infectious diseases clinician and Chair of the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens;

Dr Meirion Evans, senior lecturer in Epidemiology and Public Health at Cardiff University and Honorary Regional Epidemiologist for Public Health Wales;

David Eves, formerly Deputy Director General and Chief Inspector at the Health and Safety Executive;

Karen Jones, safety inspector;

Dr Chris Low, animal health research group manager at the Scottish Agricultural College;

Professor David Strachan, Professor of Epidemiology, St George's, University of London.

2. Copies of the report can be obtained at [www.griffininvestigation.org.uk](http://www.griffininvestigation.org.uk)

3. For media enquiries, please call 020 7759 2824 or 020 7759 2834.