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► **To cite this version:**

Fabien Corbière, Francis Barillet, Olivier Andréoletti, Francis Fidelle, Nathalie Laphitz-Bordet, et al.. Advanced survival models for risk-factor analysis in scrapie.: PrP genotype influence on scrapie infection risk and incubation period.. Journal of General Virology, Microbiology Society, 2007, 88 (Pt 2), pp.696-705. 10.1099/vir.0.81981-0 . inserm-00177029

HAL Id: inserm-00177029

<https://www.hal.inserm.fr/inserm-00177029>

Submitted on 1 Feb 2008

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1 **Advanced survival models for risk factors analysis in scrapie.**

2

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21

22 **Running title:** PrP genotype influence on scrapie infection risk and incubation period.

23 Number of words in the summary: 227

24 Number of words in the main text: 4985

25 Number of tables: 6 - Number of figures: 2

26 **Summary**

27 Because of the confounding effects of long incubation duration and flock management,
28 accurate epidemiological studies of scrapie outbreaks are difficult to carry out. In this study,
29 641 Manech Red Faced sheep from 6 scrapie affected field flocks in Pyrenees Atlantiques,
30 France, were monitored for clinical scrapie over a 6 to 9 year period. Over this period, 170
31 scrapie clinical cases were recorded and half of the culled animals were submitted for post
32 mortem TSE diagnosis to assess their infectious status. Collected data were analyzed using a
33 “mixture cure model” approach, which allowed for the discriminating effect of PRP genotype
34 and flock origin on incidence and incubation period. Simulations were performed to evaluate
35 the applicability of such a statistical model to the collected data. As expected, ARR
36 heterozygote sheep were less at risk of becoming infected than ARQ/ARQ individuals and
37 had a delayed age at clinical onset. Conversely, when compared to ARQ/ARQ, the VRQ
38 haplotype was associated with an increased infection risk, but not a shorter incubation period.
39 Considering the flock effect, we observed that a high incidence rate was not associated with
40 shorter incubation periods and that incubation period could be significantly different in flocks
41 harboring similar infection risks. These results strongly support that other parameters like the
42 nature of the agent or flock management could interfere with epidemiological dynamics of the
43 infection in scrapie affected flocks.

44

45 **Introduction**

46 Transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE) are neurodegenerative disorders occurring
47 primarily in sheep (scrapie), cattle (bovine spongiform encephalopathy - BSE), or humans
48 (Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease - CJD). They all share similar characteristics including long
49 incubation periods, a progressive pattern of disease and a clinical course resulting in death
50 (Fraser, 1976). Under natural conditions, it is considered that scrapie infection in sheep occurs

51 mainly after an early oral contamination (around birth) (Andreoletti *et al.*, 2000; Heggebo *et*
52 *al.*, 2000). Scrapie clinical onset generally occurs between 2 and 7 years (Detwiler & Baylis,
53 2003).

54 In prion diseases, the accumulation of an abnormal isoform (PrP^{sc}) of a normal cellular
55 protein (PrP^c) in tissues from infected individuals is currently considered as a disease
56 hallmark. Most of the diagnostic tests currently available are based on biochemical detection
57 of the abnormal protein (McKinley *et al.*, 1983; Race *et al.*, 2001). However post-mortem
58 tests, as carried out in the current European surveillance program (rapid test on the obex), are
59 reliable only for detection of infected animals in the second half of incubation period.

60 Because of long TSE incubation periods, data analysis is difficult without reference to flock
61 demography and management. Indeed infected individuals could be culled or die from other
62 causes before the clinical onset (intercurrent diseases – economical reasons). In this situation
63 no reliable information about their infectious status will be available (Begara-McGorum *et al.*,
64 2000; Ryder *et al.*, 2001; Thorgeirsdottir *et al.*, 2002; Billinis *et al.*, 2004).

65 Evaluation of genetic and environmental risk factors in scrapie have been conducted mainly
66 using case-control designs in which a set of affected animals is compared to their healthy
67 flock-mates or to a reference population (Hunter *et al.*, 1997; Thorgeirsdottir *et al.*, 1999;
68 Tranulis *et al.*, 1999; O'Doherty *et al.*, 2002; Acin *et al.*, 2004; Baylis *et al.*, 2004; Billinis *et*
69 *al.*, 2004; Tongue *et al.*, 2006). Such approaches revealed that TSE susceptibility in sheep is
70 controlled mainly by polymorphisms at codons 136 (T,V,A), 154 (R,H) and 171 (R,Q,H,K) of
71 the PRP gene (Cloucard *et al.*, 1995; Hunter *et al.*, 1996). V¹³⁶R¹⁵⁴Q¹⁷¹/VRQ, ARQ/VRQ
72 and ARQ/ARQ animals are usually considered the most susceptible to scrapie, whereas
73 homozygous or heterozygous AHQ and heterozygous ARR animals only show a marginal
74 susceptibility, ARR/ARR sheep being considered to be fully clinically resistant (Detwiler &
75 Baylis, 2003).

76 Surveys based on long term individual monitoring of an exposed population are less subject to
77 sampling bias (Tongue *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, they should be considered as more
78 relevant than case-control or cross-sectional studies for an accurate evaluation of the effect of
79 environmental or genetic factors on infection rate and incubation period.

80 ‘Cure models’ are part of the mixture models family (Bohning & Seidel, 2003). In ‘mixture
81 cure models’ it is considered that the studied population is a mixture of susceptible (i.e. that
82 may undergo the event of interest) and non-susceptible individuals (i.e. that will never
83 undergo the event of interest) (Farewell, 1982). Unlike classical survival analysis, they allow
84 a separate estimation of covariate effects on the incidence and incubation length. Cure models
85 also allow the estimation of the proportion of healthy (or conversely infected) individuals in a
86 population, including individuals that did not last the total length of the study (Lam *et al.*,
87 2005)

88 In this study we propose a model based on ‘mixture cure models’ approach for scrapie
89 epidemiological analysis. Robustness and reliability boundaries of the model were assessed
90 by simulations before analyzing data collected over 6 to 9 years in 6 naturally scrapie affected
91 flocks in Pyrenees Atlantiques, France.

92

93 **Material and Method**

94 **Model design**

95 In the model, death from scrapie is considered as the event of interest. Clinical scrapie cases
96 are considered to be scrapie-infected and have uncensored observations on their lifetime. For
97 apparently healthy sheep that are removed from the flock (right-censored records) it is
98 unknown whether they are scrapie-free or infected but removed prior to onset of clinical
99 scrapie. For each right censored animal, the model computes the probability to be scrapie-
100 infected, given its age and covariates information.

101 The model assumes that:

102 i) most or all deaths from scrapie occurs during a determined age-period ,

103 ii) monitoring is long enough for clinical onset to have appeared in most of the infected
104 animals,

105 ii) the longer an animal lives, the lower the probability of it being scrapie infected. Animals
106 which live longer than the last observed scrapie clinical case had an extremely low probability
107 (if not zero) of incubating scrapie.

108

109 If U is the indicator denoting SI animals (i.e. $U=1$ if the animal is scrapie-infected and
110 $U=0$ if non infected), and T is a non-negative random variable denoting the failure time of
111 interest, defined only if $U=1$, the mixture cure model is given as follows:

$$112 \quad S(t|\mathbf{x},\mathbf{z}) = \pi(\mathbf{z}) S(t|U=1,\mathbf{x}) + (1-\pi(\mathbf{z}))$$

113 where $S(t|\mathbf{x},\mathbf{z})$ is the unconditional (marginal) survival function of T for the entire population
114 under study (that is SF and SI groups), and $\pi(\mathbf{z})=P(U=1|\mathbf{z})$ is the probability of being infected
115 given a covariate vector $\mathbf{z} = (z_1, \dots, z_q)'$. $S(t|U=1,\mathbf{x}) = P(T>t|U=1,\mathbf{x})$ is the conditional survival
116 function for SI animals given a covariate vector $\mathbf{x} = (x_1, \dots, x_m)'$ (it may include the same
117 covariate as \mathbf{z}). The use of conditional attached to this function is to stress that the distribution
118 of time refers not to the whole group of animals but only to the animals that are in the SI
119 group. Note that $S(t|\mathbf{x},\mathbf{z}) \rightarrow 1-\pi(\mathbf{z})$ as $t \rightarrow \infty$, where $1-\pi(\mathbf{z})$ represents the proportion of non
120 infected animals. When $\pi = 1$, that is when no scrapie-free portion is assumed, the model
121 reduces to the traditional survival model. Whether the inclusion of a proportion of scrapie-free
122 animals leads to a significantly better fit to the data than a traditional survival model with no
123 scrapie-free animals can be tested by the deviance test statistics proposed by (Maller & Zhou,
124 1996).

125

126 Various parametric and semiparametric approaches have been proposed for mixture cure
 127 models (Peng & Carriere, 2002; Lam *et al.*, 2005). For modelling the influence of exploratory
 128 variables on the incidence, a logistic regression model is usually chosen (Kuk & Chen, 1992;
 129 Peng & Dear, 2000) :

$$130 \quad \pi(\mathbf{z}) = p(U=1|\mathbf{z}) = \exp(\beta' \mathbf{z}) / (1 + \exp(\beta' \mathbf{z}))$$

131 where β is the vector of regression parameters associated to \mathbf{z} and contains an intercept. The
 132 conditional survival function of infected animals is modelled through the semiparametric Cox
 133 proportional hazards model (Cox, 1972), which is given by :

$$134 \quad S(t|U=1, \mathbf{x}) = S_0(t|U=1)^{\exp(\gamma' \mathbf{x})}$$

135 where γ is the vector of regression parameters associated to \mathbf{x} and $S_0(t|U=1)$ is the baseline
 136 conditional survival function, which is left unspecified.

137 Through the vectors of regression parameters β and γ the mixture survival model is able to
 138 separate the covariates effect on the incidence and the latency. An estimate of the true
 139 proportion of SI animals SI_{pop} , given \mathbf{z} and \mathbf{x} , is provided by averaging the individual
 140 probabilities $P_i(U=1|z_i, x_i)$:

$$141 \quad SI_{pop} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_i P_i(U=1|z_i, x_i) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_i \left[\delta_i + (1 - \delta_i) \frac{\pi_i(z_i) S(t_i|U=1, x_i)}{1 - \pi_i(z_i) + \pi_i(z_i) S(t_i|U=1, x_i)} \right]$$

142 where δ_i is the censoring indicator with 1 if t_i is uncensored and 0 otherwise. Obviously if $\delta_i =$
 143 1, then $P_i(U=1)=1$. When $\delta_i = 0$, then $P_i(U=1|z_i, x_i)$ will depend on the survival length and will
 144 drop to zero as $t \rightarrow \infty$. Note that the better the model fits the data, through covariate vectors \mathbf{z}'
 145 and \mathbf{x}' , the more accurate is the estimation of the proportion of SI animals.

146

147 **Simulation studies**

148 Simulations were conducted to test i) the ability of the model to estimate the proportion of
 149 scrapie-infected animals and to discriminate covariate effects on the infection risk and

150 incubation duration and ii) the effect of individual monitoring length on model outputs. We
151 assumed that non infected animals (named Scrapie Free animals SF) would never die from
152 scrapie. Consequently observations realized on SF animals were right censored. Scrapie
153 infected animals (named Scrapie-Infected SI), either died from clinical scrapie (uncensored
154 records) or were eliminated from the flock before clinical onset (right-censored). Simulations
155 were performed using (i) genetic and biological parameters (infection rates, ages at clinical
156 death, and flock demography) described in scrapie outbreaks or already used in mathematical
157 modelling (simulation design 1) (Matthews *et al.*, 2001; Hagenaars *et al.*, 2003; Hopp *et al.*,
158 2003; Baylis *et al.*, 2004; Eglin *et al.*, 2005; Touzeau *et al.*, 2005) and (ii) ages at death from
159 scrapie reflecting observation realized in our data set (simulation design 2).

160 The capacity of the model to separate covariate effects on incidence and incubation length
161 (age at death) was assessed by generating two independent binary covariates, one (Z_1)
162 affecting only the incidence and the other (Z_2) affecting only the incubation duration. The
163 incidence is given the logistic form $\pi(z_1, z_2) = \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Z_1 + \beta_2 Z_2) / (1 + \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Z_1 + \beta_2 Z_2))$, where
164 β_1 and β_2 are the effects of covariates Z_1 and Z_2 on the proportion of infected individuals,
165 respectively. Since Z_2 should have no effect on the incidence, β_2 was set to 0. Thus, the
166 proportion of infected animals is $\pi(z_1=0, z_2) = \exp(\beta_0) / (1 + \exp(\beta_0))$ for animals sharing $Z_1=0$ and
167 $\pi(z_1=1, z_2) = \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1) / (1 + \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1))$ for those sharing $Z_1=1$. We set $\beta_0 = -0.5$ and $\beta_1 = -1$, so
168 that the corresponding proportions of infected sheep are 37.7 % (animals with $Z_1=0$) and
169 18.22 % (animals with $Z_1=1$), respectively.

170 The lognormal distribution was used as the distribution function for life expectancies of
171 infected animals, with survival function $S(t|U=1) = 1 - \Phi[(\ln t - \mu - \gamma_1 Z_1 - \gamma_2 Z_2) / \sigma]$, where Φ is the
172 distribution function of the standard normal law. Unlike for the incidence part, γ_1 was set to 0,
173 because Z_1 should have no effect on the latency, whatever the value of Z_2 . In simulation
174 design, 1, the scale (μ) and shape (σ) parameters for the lognormal distribution function were

175 set to 1.2 and 0.4 respectively. In the absence of censoring, events of interest (scrapie deaths)
176 were allowed to occur at median age 3.3 years old (interquartile range = 2.5 - 4.2,) for
177 individuals with $Z_2=0$. We set $\gamma_2 = 0.3$ so that infected individuals with $Z_2=1$ would die later,
178 at median age 4.4 years old (interquartile range = 3.4 – 5.7). In simulation design 2, we set μ
179 = $\ln 2$, $\sigma = 0.5$, $\gamma_1 = 0$ and $\gamma_2 = 0.375$, so that median ages at clinical onset were 2.00
180 (interquartile range = 1.5 – 2.8) and 3.00 years old (interquartile range = 2.1 – 4.2) (figure 1a).
181 Monitoring length were generated according to the Weibull distribution $W(\lambda, \rho)$ with shape (λ)
182 and scale (ρ) parameters. Thirteen different scenarios were investigated with median life
183 expectancy (meaning monitoring length) ranging from 2.5 years to 9.5 years old. These
184 scenarios covered a large panel of flock management policies and demography. For each
185 scenario and simulation design, 500 independent data sets, each constituted with 500
186 individuals, were generated and submitted to model analysis. The absolute biases ($B(\hat{c}) = \sum_i$
187 $(\hat{c}_i - c_0)/500$) and mean squared errors ($MSE(\hat{c}) = \sum_i (\hat{c}_i - c_0)^2/500$), where \hat{c}_i are the estimates of
188 c_0 , were computed for the 5 parameters estimates.

189 Sample generation and model computations were performed using SAS software (SAS-PC
190 system®, Version 8.2 for Windows, SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, 1999-2001).

191

192 **Flocks**

193 Investigations were carried out on 6 scrapie naturally affected dairy flocks, bred by private
194 farmers, in Pyrenees Atlantiques, France. These flocks had been involved in a long-term
195 scrapie epidemiology research project since 1994 (flock C) and 1998 (other 5 flocks). Sheep
196 were all Manech Red Faced pure-breed. Table 1 shows, for each flock, the average size and
197 the estimated year of first occurrence of scrapie. The high incidences of scrapie clinical
198 suspicions (confirmed or not) in ewes born prior to enrolment in the research project, suggest
199 different, but whatever high, infection pressures (table 1).

200 At the time of enrolment, PrP polymorphism at codons 136, 154 and 171 of the PRP gene was
201 determined for all present sheep, including breeding males and females and replacement
202 lambs. Birth date, pedigree, date and cause of death or removal from the flock were
203 systematically recorded for all the animals up to January 2006. No valuable information could
204 be collected for male and female lambs slaughtered between 1 to 3 months old.

205 To comply with the requirement of adequate monitoring length and the provision of high
206 quality data (including reliable diagnosis) only a few birth cohorts were considered within
207 each flock for the analysis. Birth cohorts were selected in which all scrapie clinical suspicions
208 were confirmed by histopathology and complete PrP genotype profiles were available.

209 The data set submitted for analysis consisted of the 1998 birth cohort (born between October
210 and December 1997) for flock A, the 1999 birth cohort (born between October and December
211 1998) for flocks B, D, E and F and the 1995, 1996, 1997 birth cohorts in flock C (animals
212 born in November and December 1994, 1995 and 1996, respectively) (table 2). Only
213 homebred animals were included in the analysis, while purchased sheep (n=10) were not
214 considered. Finally, our sample comprised 641 sheep including 170 scrapie clinical cases.

215 Apparently healthy culled sheep were submitted for PrPsc detection on obex and palatine
216 tonsils by ELISA (Platelia BSE detection Kit, Biorad) and immunohistochemistry
217 (Andreoletti *et al.*, 2002). All the sheep included in our initial sample were not examined,
218 either because of failure to track these animals during the elimination process, or because they
219 were still alive at the time of writing (January 2006). From these last animals palatine tonsils
220 biopsies were performed each year from 2002 to 2005 (inclusive) for PrPsc
221 immunohistochemistry detection (Andreoletti *et al.*, 2002). To account for missing
222 information, a one-side 95 percent confidence interval for the true proportion of infected
223 animals in each PRP genotype group was calculated using the hypergeometric law.

224 In the mixture cure model analysis, PRP genotype and the flock were used as covariates and
225 age at death from clinical scrapie was considered as the survival measurement. Ninety-five
226 percent confidence intervals for adjusted odds ratios (OR) from the logistic part and adjusted
227 relative risks (RR) from the Cox PH part of the mixture cure model were computed using the
228 bias corrected, accelerated bootstrap method (Davison & Hinkley, 1997).

229 **Results**

230 **Simulations**

231 As expected, the longer an animal lived (long individual monitoring), the smaller were the
232 mean absolute biases and mean squared errors (MSE, not shown) for the different estimates
233 (figure 1B and 1C). Biases and MSE were acceptable for inference when the monitoring time
234 was longer than the median (theoretical) incubation duration. For the first set of simulated
235 incubation times (median age at death 3.3 and 4.45 years old), the estimates of the proportion
236 of infected animals (β_0) and the effects of Z_2 on the incidence (β_2) were highly biased
237 (absolute bias over 0.1) for median monitoring times less than 5.5 years (figure 1B). For the
238 second set of simulated incubation durations (median age at death 2 and 3.3 years old) similar
239 results were obtained for median monitoring times under 3.5 years (figure 1C). In our
240 population median age at death in scrapie affected animals was 1.7 years (figure 1A and table
241 3) and the median monitoring time was 4.90 years (table 4). Under these conditions, the
242 models outputs were expected to be relevant in the analysis our data set.

243

244 **PrP genetic structure of the studied cohorts**

245 Amongst the studied cohorts, the ARQ and ARR alleles were dominant while AHQ and VRQ
246 alleles were rare (table 2). The sample's genetic structure is consistent with previously
247 reported PRP polymorphism frequencies in the Manech Red Faced breed (Palhiere *et al.*,
248 2002).

249 Because of low numbers of individuals in some PrP genotypes, animals were grouped
250 according to their level of susceptibility to classical scrapie (Defra, 2003). ARQ/ARQ,
251 AHQ/AHQ and AHQ/ARQ sheep were considered in a medium risk group named S/S
252 (n=343). ARR/ARQ, ARR/AHQ and ARR/VRQ animals were included in a low risk group
253 named R/S (n=212). ARQ/VRQ, AHQ/VRQ and VRQ/VRQ animals were included in a

254 single high risk group named VRQ/x (n=49) (table 3). Considering these PrP genotype
255 groups, the genetic structure was not statistically different in the 6 selected flocks (Chi-square
256 test with 15 degrees of freedom $\chi^2= 15.95$, $p=0.38$).

257 **Scrapie clinical cases**

258 Clinical scrapie cases were mainly observed in ARQ/ARQ (n=131 – 77.06%), and ARQ/VRQ
259 (n=28 – 16.47%) genotypes, while heterozygote ARR were poorly affected (R/S sheep n= 9 –
260 5.29%) (table 2 and 3). High incidences in susceptible PrP genotypes ARQ/ARQ and
261 ARQ/VRQ suggested a high infection pressure. No clinical cases were observed, neither in
262 ARR/ARR (n=37), nor in ARR/VRQ (n=3), ARR/ARH (n=3) or AHQ/VRQ (n=3) animals.
263 However the number of animals with these three last genotypes was too low to draw any
264 conclusion.

265 The Kaplan-Meier plots of the survival distribution functions for scrapie clinical occurrence
266 indicate the absence of new scrapie cases after 5.54 years, whatever the genotype group
267 considered (figure 2). This lack of new clinical cases fulfils a basic requirement allowing the
268 application of the Cox PH mixture cure model, i.e. (i) most or all death due to scrapie
269 occurred in a defined age period (ii) the monitoring length was sufficient to allow almost all
270 infected animals to show clinical signs.

271

272 **Monitoring length in clinically healthy sheep**

273 A large number (n=264 – 60.83%) of clinically healthy animals were eliminated by breeders
274 for husbandry reasons at younger ages than the last observed clinical case (table 4). However,
275 94.24 % of these symptomless sheep lived older than the median age at clinical onset (1.70
276 years old) and 72.12 % reached 3.57 years old, which represented the 90th percentile of the
277 age distribution of scrapie clinical cases.

278 Because of the implementation of French TSE legislation at the beginning of 2003, breeders
279 had to remove VRQ carrier animals from scrapie affected flocks. Consequently VRQ animals,
280 mainly ARR/VRQ, were eliminated earlier than expected and had a statistically shorter
281 follow-up than R/S animals (analyse of variance, $F_{431,2} = 13.13$, $p < 10^{-4}$).

282

283 **Active detection of subclinically infected sheep**

284 From the 471 clinically healthy sheep (with no clinical scrapie) eliminated during the study,
285 220 (46.71 %) were submitted to post mortem for PrPsc detection test (mean age 4.72 years
286 old – 95% confidence interval = 1.87- 7.57). Sampled animals represented 70% of VRQ/x and
287 72.04 % of S/S but only 24.13 % of R/S and 13.51 % of R/R (table 5).

288 From the tested animals only four ARQ/ARQ sheep (aged 1.89, 2.25, 2.32 and 4.39 years),
289 and one ARQ/VRQ sheep (3.04 years) were found positive. Fifty nine animals initially
290 included in the study were still alive at the time of writing (5 ARR/ARR, 42 ARR/ARQ and
291 12 ARQ/ARQ). No PrPsc was detected in any of these animals using tonsil biopsy. According
292 to the hypergeometric law, the one sided 95% confidence interval for the number of
293 apparently healthy but infected animals eliminated from the flocks was 5 to 25 (table 5).

294

295 **Results from the mixture cure model analysis**

296 The deviance statistic test ($\chi^2_{01}=30.93$, $p < 10^{-4}$) indicated that incorporating a scrapie-free
297 fraction provided a better fit to the data than the traditional Cox proportional hazards model
298 and that estimated effects were more relevant.

299 **Proportion of infected animals**

300 ARR/ARR animals were not included in the analysis, because there were no confirmed
301 clinical cases of this genotype. According to the proposed model, the predicted number of
302 subclinically infected animals was 20.75 (respectively 3.65 in the R/S group, 14.83 in the S/S

303 group and 3.22 in the VRQ carrier group, point estimate minus number of clinical cases)
304 (table 5). Strikingly these predicted numbers were in close agreement with those obtained by
305 the active detection of subclinical cases.

306 **Genotype influence on incidence and incubation duration**

307 Results from the Cox mixture cure model indicated that ARR heterozygote animals were at
308 lower risk of infection than S/S animals (table 6). Conversely VRQ allele carriers (excluding
309 ARR/VRQ) were at higher risk of being infected. Age at clinical onset was significantly
310 delayed in R/S animals when compared to S/S animals. No significant difference was found
311 between S/S and VRQ allele carrier (table 6).

312 **Flock effect on incidence and incubation length**

313 Because of insufficient numbers of ARQ/VRQ or ARR/ARQ clinical scrapie cases in some
314 flocks the analysis was restricted to the ARQ/ARQ animals (table 6). The risk for ARQ/ARQ
315 animals of being infected was significantly lower in flock A, D and E than in flock C (table
316 6). No significant difference was observed between flock C, flock B and F. Interestingly age
317 at clinical onset was significantly shortened in some flocks with a lower infection risk (flock
318 D compared to flock C). Meanwhile, age at clinical onset could be significantly different in
319 flocks harbouring a similar infection risk: infected animals from flock F had delayed clinical
320 onset compared to flock C while in flock B it was shortened. Taken together, these results
321 suggest strongly that age at clinical onset and infection risk are not associated parameters.

322

323 **Discussion**

324 **Working hypothesis**

325 Only a few studies of scrapie outbreaks, based on longitudinal monitoring, have been
326 published (Elsen *et al.*, 1999; Diaz *et al.*, 2005). Using survival analysis, they aimed at
327 determining the influence of PrP genotype, rearing type and dam clinical status on individual

328 risk of developing clinical scrapie. Survival analysis assumes intrinsically that if, in an
329 exposed population, a long enough and complete surveillance of individuals is possible, each
330 would experience the event of interest i.e. clinical scrapie. For TSE, this hypothesis is
331 obviously inadequate. Indeed, under natural exposure, ARR/ARR animals and a large
332 proportion of susceptible genotype animals will remain uninfected (Elsen *et al.*, 1999).

333 Because a mixed population of susceptible and non-susceptible individuals is considered,
334 ‘mixture cure models’ appear to be an attractive approach for scrapie epidemiological
335 analysis. However fulfilment of several conditions is compulsory for their sound application.
336 Such constraints require hypotheses about scrapie pathogenesis and biology. Amongst the
337 basic hypotheses we considered were that animals born in an infected flock, if not infected in
338 their early life, would remain negative. Under natural exposure conditions, scrapie
339 contamination is considered to occur preferentially around birth (Andreoletti *et al.*, 2000;
340 Heggebo *et al.*, 2000; van Keulen *et al.*, 2000). We therefore hypothesized that age at death
341 from scrapie (clinical stage) was a relevant approximation of the incubation period. Moreover
342 animal susceptibility seems to decrease dramatically with age (Hourrigan *et al.*, 1979;
343 Andreoletti *et al.*, 2000). Clinical cases have been reported in young and adult susceptible
344 animals introduced to infected flocks (Hourrigan *et al.*, 1979; Ryder *et al.*, 2004) but the
345 importance, relative to the neonatal contamination, of such lateral transmission in adult sheep
346 could not be estimated. The other main hypothesis we made was that a very few (if not zero)
347 infected individuals would be alive at the end of the study. The observed survival distribution
348 plots were consistent with this hypothesis. However, existence of long term subclinical
349 carriers remains a major question of scrapie epidemiology. Currently, it is impossible to
350 assume that an apparently healthy animal (whatever the test used to establish the infectious
351 status) is not incubating scrapie. Recent description of atypical cases or Nor98 cases in old
352 and apparently healthy animals, and difficulties in assessing the diagnosis, sustain the long

353 term subclinical carriers' hypothesis (Benestad *et al.*, 2003; Le Dur *et al.*, 2005). However,
354 atypical scrapie occurs at a very low detected prevalence level (3 to 11 cases per 10000
355 examined) and in most cases, only one to three cases could be detected in stamped-out
356 affected flocks (De Bosschere *et al.*, 2004; Onnasch *et al.*, 2004; Orge *et al.*, 2004). This
357 implies that approximately 0.2 to 0.8 sheep could have be infected with atypical scrapie in the
358 considered flocks, which is negligible when compared to the number of classical scrapie cases
359 in the studied cohorts (n=170). At the population level, the influence of an atypical case on
360 the model outputs was considered to be negligible.

361 Finally, even if the hypothesis of some adult lateral transmission and long term subclinical
362 carriers could not definitely be ruled out, both phenomena seemed marginal enough in our
363 population to avoid major transgression from the model application. From simulations, major
364 biases were only observed when the monitoring length was shorter than the median
365 (theoretical) incubation duration. Similar trends were obtained by (Yu *et al.*, 2004) when
366 studying the influence of the follow-up length on the cure fraction estimation for several
367 human cancers. The monitoring length in the studied sheep was long enough to insure small
368 biases for the estimates of PRP genotype and flock effects.

369

370 **Asymptomatic culled animals**

371 The mixture cure model approach allowed the estimation of infected individuals and included
372 those eliminated while incubating the disease. Model outputs and laboratory findings were in
373 close agreement, and indicated a very low number of sheep removed while incubating scrapie.
374 This result is consistent with observations from another study based on longitudinal survey in
375 a Texel flock (Baylis *et al.*, 2002). It contrasts, however, with other publications in which
376 high numbers of scrapie incubating animals were described (Thorgeirsdottir *et al.*, 2002;

377 Billinis *et al.*, 2004). Similarly, the modelling of a scrapie outbreak in a cheviot flock
378 predicted a high ratio of infections to cases (2.2:1) (Matthews *et al.*, 2001).

379 Discrepancies between these results lay certainly in the data collection plan. Studies reporting
380 a high proportion of asymptomatic animals were based on cross-sectional designs with data
381 collected at stamping-out. In our study, most sheep were culled after a long individual
382 monitoring period which allowed scrapie clinical onset. As indicated by our simulations,
383 shorter monitoring lengths, as modelled by (Matthews *et al.*, 2001) (median length 3.00
384 years), would have resulted in the observation of fewer clinical cases and a higher number of
385 subclinical cases.

386

387 **Genetic susceptibility to scrapie and incubation period**

388 The comparison of the fit provided by the mixture cure model and the traditional Cox
389 Proportional model indicated that our approach was more relevant when analysing the PrP
390 genotype and flock effects. According to our results, with ARQ homozygote animals as the
391 baseline, VRQ carriers were at higher risk of infection and ARR heterozygotes at lower risk.
392 This is consistent with most already published studies based on data collected from culled
393 flocks (Thorgeirsdottir *et al.*, 1999; Tranulis *et al.*, 1999; Acin *et al.*, 2004; Billinis *et al.*,
394 2004).

395 Incubation length is a major feature of TSE phenotype. In our population, while clinical signs
396 were delayed in ARR heterozygotes compared to ARQ homozygotes, no difference could be
397 observed between ARQ/VRQ carriers and ARQ homozygotes. Similar phenomenon was
398 observed in an Irish flock (O'Doherty *et al.*, 2002). However it differed from estimations
399 obtained in a French Romanov flock (Elsen *et al.*, 1999) and in a Texel flock (Baylis *et al.*,
400 2002). In both these naturally affected scrapie flocks significant differences in age at death
401 were reported between ARQ/ARQ and ARQ/VRQ.

402 In sheep, experimental challenge indicated that incubation period depends both on sheep
403 genotype and TSE isolate. While most scrapie isolates will produce shorter incubation periods
404 in VRQ allele carriers, other TSE agent such as BSE will behave conversely (Foster *et al.*,
405 2001; Jeffrey *et al.*, 2006). In this context, difference in agent (strain) could be a possible
406 explanation for the observed variability.

407 In rodent scrapie models, it has been demonstrated that attack rate and incubation length
408 variations could be observed according to the infectious dose. Low infectious dose could lead
409 to incubation period lengthening and decreased infection efficiency (Kimberlin & Wilesmith,
410 1994; Jacquemot *et al.*, 2005). In natural scrapie there is no available estimation of the actual
411 infectious pressure. Because of differences in the observed incidences, the infection pressure
412 is usually considered to be different according to the cohort considered within a flock or
413 between flocks (Baylis *et al.*, 2002; Touzeau *et al.*, 2005). In our study, scrapie incubation
414 duration appeared not to be associated with the infection rate. Age at clinical onset in
415 ARQ/ARQ infected animals also clearly differed (shorter incubation period in our study) from
416 previously reported in animals bearing the same genotype (Woolhouse *et al.*, 1998; Elsen *et*
417 *al.*, 1999; O'Doherty *et al.*, 2002; Redman *et al.*, 2002; Baylis *et al.*, 2004). Taken together
418 these observations could suggest that (i) biologically different scrapie agents are involved in
419 the different flocks or that (ii) other factors linked to flock management could influence
420 incidence and incubation.

421 To go further, the evaluation of agent biodiversity in the studied cohorts from these flocks is
422 ongoing through biochemical studies and bioassays. Meanwhile the effect of increasing
423 infectious dose on incubation length in animals bearing similar PRP genotypes and which
424 were orally contaminated at birth is under investigation.

425

426 The mixture cure model presented here has revealed an interesting tool to analyze data
427 collected from longitudinal surveys in naturally affected scrapie flocks. Its main constraint is
428 the requirement of a long enough individual monitoring period. Finally, because such models
429 allow for the combinatory analysis of several covariate effects they should be considered as a
430 potential powerful tool for epidemiological analysis in animal diseases.

431

432 **Acknowledgements**

433 Financial support of this work was provided by EU project QLRT-2000-01733
434 “Scrapiefreesheep”. The authors wish to thank the technical staff of the Manech breeders’
435 organization (Centre Départemental d’Elevage Ovins), and the Groupement de Défense
436 sanitaire des Pyrénées Atlantiques, for their involvement in the longitudinal survey of scrapie
437 affected flocks started in the middle of the 90’s.

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Table 1: size and within flock scrapie history for the 6 selected flocks.

	Flock					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Flock size (adult ewes) †	321	331	302	463	396	380
Estimated start of scrapie outbreak	1992	1992	1993	1995	1996	1996
Number of scrapie clinical cases in ewes born before the studied cohorts of birth	135	70	96	150	90	190

† flock size at lambing of the studied cohorts of birth.

Table 2: PrP genotype distribution and number of clinical scrapie cases in the studied birth cohorts from 6 (A to F) naturally scrapie affected flocks.

Group	PrP genotype	Flock and selected cohorts of birth								Total	Number of clinical cases
		A	B	C			D	E	F		
		1998	1999	1995	1996	1997	1999	1999	1999		
S/S	ARQ/ARQ	43	42	46	43	25	45	53	34	331	131
	AHQ/ARQ	2	-	3	3	-	3	1	-	12	1
VRQ/x	ARQ/VRQ	8	5	3	-	6	6	10	9	47	28
	AHQ/VRQ	-	-	1			-	-	-	1	0
	VRQ/VRQ	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	1
	ARR/ARQ	28	24	18	15	29	33	34	25	206	9
R/S	ARR/AHQ	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	0
	ARR/VRQ	1	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	3	0
R/R	ARR/ARR	7	-	-	4	7	7	10	2	37	0
Total		89	71	71	66	70	95	109	70	641	170

Table 3: Clinical scrapie cases (numbers and percentages) per genotype group and median age at death (clinical scrapie) in the studied birth cohorts.

Flock	PrP genotype group			
	R/R	R/S	S/S	VRQ/x
A	7 7.90 %	29 32.58%	45 50.56%	8 8.99%
B	0 0.00%	24 33.80%	42 59.15%	5 7.04%
C	11 5.31%	65 31.40%	120 57.97%	11 5.31%
D	7 7.37%	34 35.79%	48 50.53%	6 6.32%
E	10 9.17%	35 32.11%	54 49.54%	10 9.17%
F	2 2.86%	25 35.71%	34 48.57%	9 12.86%
Total	37 5.77%	212 33.07%	343 54.51%	49 7.64%
Clinical cases	0	9 4.25%	132 38.48%	29 59.18%
Median age at death (years) [min – max]	-	3.61 [3.26 – 4.13]	1.62 [0.77 – 5.54]	2.05 [1.14 -4.76]

Table 4: Monitoring duration (years) in apparently healthy sheep from the studied birth cohorts.

PrP genotype Group	N	monitoring duration (years)			
		25 ^e centile	Median	75 ^e centile	Maximum
R/S	203	3.58	5.59	7.09	9.09
S/S	211	3.47	4.69	5.64	8.04
VRQ/x	20	2.51	3.90	4.43	8.07
Total	434	3.50	4.90	6.36	9.09

Table 5: Number and percentage of infected animals by PrP genotype group according to clinical cases and laboratory tests findings in clinically healthy animals and the logistic Cox PH mixture cure model in the studied birth cohorts.

PRP genotype group	Clinical cases	Clinically healthy sheep Positive / tested (total)	Estimated number (%) of infected sheep	
			Clinical + subclinical cases (95 % CI)	logistic-CoxPH mixture cure model (point estimate)
R/R	0	0/5 (37)	-	-
R/S	9	0/49 (203)	9 – 20 (4.24 – 9.43)	12.65 (5.97)
S/S	132	4/152 (211)	136 – 142 (39.35 – 41.40)	146.83 (42.81)
VRQ/x	29	1/14 (20)	30 – 33 (61.22 – 67.34)	31.22 (63.71)
Total	170	5/220 (471)	175 - 195 (28.97 – 32.28)	190.70 (31.58)

† the lower bound is the observed proportion of scrapie infected sheep based on clinical survey and laboratory tests, the upper bound is derived from the hypergeometric law to account for clinically healthy sheep without laboratory test (n = 251). The large confidence interval for R/S animals was due to the low proportion of sampled animals.

Table 6: Effects of PRP genotype and flock origin on incidence and incubation duration in the studied birth cohorts from 6 scrapie infected flocks according to the logistic-Cox PH mixture cure model.

Variable	Incidence			Incubation duration		
	OR	CI _{95%} *	p†	HR	CI _{95%} *	p†
Genotype vs. <i>S/S</i>						
R/S	0.08	0.04 – 0.14	<0.0001	0.28	0.14 – 0.56	0.0003
VRQ/x	2.71	1.41 – 5.21	0.003	0.84	0.55 – 1.28	0.4117
Flock vs. <i>flock C</i> (ARQ/ARQ animals only)						
A	0.35	0.17 – 0.72	0.0045	1.75	0.95 – 3.22	0.0723
B	0.72	0.36 – 1.46	0.3695	2.49	1.46 – 4.25	0.0008
D	0.40	0.20 – 0.81	0.0113	1.92	1.08 – 3.43	0.0264
E	0.20	0.09 – 0.43	<0.0001	1.33	0.67 – 2.61	0.4144
F	1.74	0.76 – 3.89	0.1796	0.41	0.23 – 0.72	0.0021

OR = adjusted odds ratio; HR= adjusted hazard risk; *CI_{95%} = 95 % confidence interval for OR and HR estimated by the bias corrected accelerated bootstrap method over 5000 re-samples. † Level of significance of the variable (p value). The *S/S* genotype group and flock C were used as baseline. The influence of flock could not be investigated in R/S and VRQ allele carriers groups, due to few clinical cases in some flocks.

Captions to figures

Figure 1: (A) simulation design for incubation lengths. Survival distribution functions for simulation design 1, (black dotted lines, median age at onset 3.3 and 4.45 years) and simulation design 2 (grey dotted lines, median age at onset 2 and 3 years) ; survival distribution function for scrapie clinical cases in the studied population (solid black line). (B and C) Absolute biases of the estimates for each monitoring scenario (B, simulation design 1 and C simulation design 2) using the mixture cure model: white circle (β_0), proportion of infected individuals; white square (β_1), effect of covariate Z_1 on the incidence; white triangle (β_2), effect the Z_2 on the incidence; black square (γ_1), effect of covariate Z_1 on latency, black triangle (γ_2), effect of covariate Z_2 on latency.

Figure 2: Kaplan-Meier survival distribution functions for deaths from scrapie in the studied birth cohorts from 6 flocks of Manech Red Faced sheep. Overall sample (solid line, n=604); R/S genotype group (dotted line, n=212); S/S genotype group (medium dashed line, n=343); VRQ allele carrier group (long dashed line, n=49). Survival times are measured from date of birth. Censored events (i.e. culling or deaths from causes other than scrapie) are shown as circles. The last observed clinical case (5.54 years old) is indicated by the black arrow.