

# Experts close to deal over Johne's

## HIGH HOPES OF INTERNATIONAL BLUEPRINT TO TACKLE PROGRESSIVE WASTING CONDITION IN CATTLE

BY JOE WATSON

Hopes are high of an international agreement to control a debilitating cattle disease persistently linked with a human health problem.

Scientists meeting in Inverness are in the final stages of recommending a new strategy to deal with Johne's disease, which is on the increase globally.

Johne's is a chronic, progressive wasting condition caused by the bacteria, *Mycobacterium avium*. It is regularly associated with Crohn's, a severe bowel condition in humans. An actual link between the two has never been proven.

The disease is passed on from cows to their calves which remain persistently infected and who then transmit it on to other animals herds via their contaminated faeces.

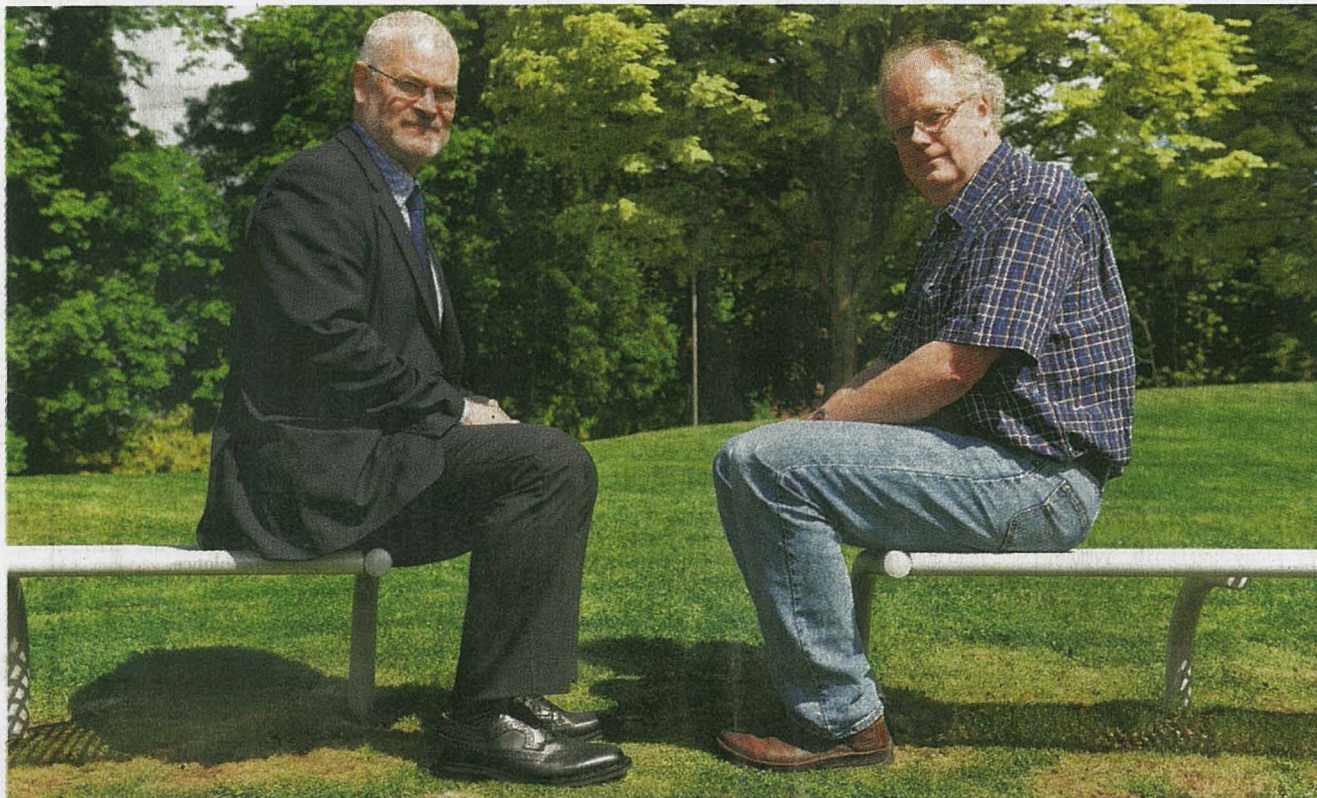
Recent figures from farming ministry Defra point to 35% of UK beef and dairy herds being either infected or having been exposed to a bacteria that can be carried by rabbits. According to scien-

tists that grossly underestimates infection levels they believe are above 70%.

The gathering, which started yesterday in the city's Eden Court Theatre and which continues today, involves 85 experts and marks the end of a three-year European Commission-funded project into a disease also known as paratuberculosis.

It is the possible similarity with Crohn's that prompted the EC to take precautionary action and set

up the ParaTBTools project, led by Dutchman Douwe Bakker, of the Central Veterinary Institute in the Netherlands. The initiative involves 200 scientists working in teams across Europe as well as in the US, Canada, Argentina and New Zealand. Inverness has played an important role through the Scottish Agricultural College and its head of veterinary epi-



**TEAM LEADERS: Prof George Gunn, left, and Douwe Bakker are attending the gathering.** Photograph: David Whittaker-Smith

demiology, Professor George Gunn, who has led several of the scientific teams.

Mr Bakker expects the group to agree a control strategy that will be put to the EC within months.

He said there was a need for

a common control programme as member states were all taking different approaches which made it both difficult to get a proper handle on the prevalence of the disease as well as deal with it.

Harmonising testing systems, control programmes and various other techniques, including advice on dealing with it, would be the first step in helping the cattle sector eradicate Johne's.

Mr Bakker acknowledged it

would be a costly exercise as the only way of tackling the condition is to cull infected animals. He, however, said industry would quickly see the benefits as performance would be improved and financial returns boosted.

Mr Bakker said the problem had to be tackled as it caused significant welfare problems.

Asked if taxpayers should fund any initiative, Mr Bakker said: "It should be funded by the industry itself. Using the existing Danish example farmers are benefiting from selective culling of infected animals. Their incomes are going up because they end up with a better performing herd."

Denmark admits an 80% infection level. Mr Bakker cited its action programme as one that could be followed as animals there are frequently tested. Advice to farmers on dealing with the disease was also good as it focused on the continued selective removal of infected animals.

The Netherlands too is forcing farmers to act. Mr Bakker said that, from next year, dairy farms will be unable to sell their milk unless they are involved in a Johne's testing regime and dealing with infected animals.

All the country's dairy processors were behind the scheme. "The Dutch programme has a penalty attached. You have to be involved in it. If not you cannot deliver your milk," he added.