Cannibal study darkens mad cow outlook

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A British researcher, using a study of cannibals, warns that mad cow disease may eventually kill lot more humans than is known now.

The findings, published Friday in the British medical journal Lancet, were drawn from a study of cannibals in New Guinea who had enjoyed long lives until they fell victim to a brain-wasting disease.

The research by the University College in London studied kuru, a disease that had taken a heavy toll of the cannibals. It said kuru can incubate for decades but then can start a quick, irreversible descent into dementia and death, reports The New York Times.

"Recent estimates of the size of the vCJD epidemic based on uniform genetic susceptibility could be substantial underestimations," said Dr. John Collinge, the study's lead author. Humans get vCJD, or variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, from cows with mad cow disease.

The Times said several experts on prion diseases, blamed for killing the New Guinea cannibals and British eaters of infected beef, praised the work of the researchers but felt the findings did not prove there will be future waves of deaths among people who ate beef from prion-infected cows in the 1980's. So far about 160 people, mostly in Britain, have died of vCJD.

Collinge said he was not predicting a specific number of deaths. He also said he did not believe the disease is disappearing.

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