Advanced survival models for risk-factor analysis in scrapie

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ABSTRACT

Because of the confounding effects of long incubation duration and flock management, accurate epidemiological studies of scrapie outbreaks are difficult to carry out. In this study, 641 Manech red-faced sheep from six scrapie-affected field flocks in Pyrénées Atlantiques, France, were monitored for clinical scrapie over a 6–9 year period. Over this period, 170 scrapie clinical cases were recorded and half of the culled animals were submitted for post-mortem transmissible spongiform encephalopathy diagnosis to assess their infectious status. Collected data were analysed using a 'mixture cure model' approach, which allowed for the discriminating effect of PrP genotype and flock origin on incidence and incubation period. Simulations were performed to evaluate the applicability of such a statistical model to the collected data. As expected, ARR heterozygote sheep were less at risk of becoming infected than ARQ/ARQ individuals and had a greater age at clinical onset. Conversely, when compared with ARQ/ARQ, the VRQ haplotype was associated with an increased infection risk, but not a shorter incubation period. Considering the flock effect, we observed that a high incidence rate was not associated with shorter incubation periods and that the incubation period could be significantly different in flocks harbouring similar infection risks. These results strongly support the conclusion that other parameters, such as the nature of the agent or flock management, could interfere with epidemiological dynamics of the infection in scrapie-affected flocks.

INTRODUCTION

Transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE) are neurodegenerative disorders that occur primarily in sheep (scrapie), cattle (bovine spongiform encephalopathy; BSE) or humans (Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease; CJD). They all share similar characteristics. including long incubation periods, a progressive pattern of disease and a clinical course resulting in death (Fraser, 1976). Under natural conditions, it is considered that scrapie infection in sheep occurs mainly after an early oral contamination (around birth) (Andréoletti et al., 2000; Heggebo et al., 2000). Scrapie clinical onset generally occurs between 2 and 7 years (Detwiler & Baylis, 2003).

In prion diseases, the accumulation of an abnormal isoform (PrPSc) of a normal cellular protein (PrPC) in tissues from infected individuals is currently considered as a disease hallmark. Most of the diagnostic tests currently available are based on biochemical detection of the abnormal protein (McKinley et al., 1983; Race et al., 2001). However, post-mortem tests, as carried out in the current European surveillance programme (rapid test on the obex), are reliable only for detection of infected animals in the second half of the incubation period.

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

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

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

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

In this study, we propose a model based on a 'mixture cure models' approach for scrapie epidemiological analysis. Robustness and reliability boundaries of the model were assessed by simulations before analysing data collected over 6–9 years in six naturally scrapie-affected flocks in Pyrénées Atlantiques, France.

METHODS

Model design.

In the model, death from scrapie is considered as the event of interest. Clinical scrapie cases are considered to be scrapie-infected (SI) and have uncensored observations over their lifetime. For apparently healthy sheep that are removed from the flock (right-censored records), it is not known whether they are scrapie-free (SF) or infected but removed prior to

the onset of clinical scrapie. For each right-censored animal, the model computes the probability of being scrapie-infected, given its age and covariates information.

The model assumes that: (i) most or all deaths from scrapie occur during a determined age-period, (ii) monitoring is long enough for clinical onset to have appeared in most of the infected animals and (iii) the longer an animal lives, the lower the probability of it being scrapie infected. Animals which live longer than the last observed scrapie clinical case are considered to have an extremely low probability (if not zero) of incubating scrapie.

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

$$S(t|\boldsymbol{x},\boldsymbol{z}) = \pi(\boldsymbol{z})\, S(t|U=1,\boldsymbol{x}) + [1-\pi(\boldsymbol{z})]$$

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

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

$$\pi(\boldsymbol{z}) = p(U=1|\boldsymbol{z}) = \frac{\exp(\beta'\boldsymbol{z})}{[1+\exp(\beta'\boldsymbol{z})]}$$

where β is the vector of regression parameters associated with $\boldsymbol{z}$ and contains an intercept. The conditional survival function of infected animals is modelled through the semiparametric Cox proportional hazards (PH) model (Cox, 1972), which is given by

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

where γ is the vector of regression parameters associated with x and $S_0(t|U=1)$ is the baseline conditional survival function, which is left unspecified.

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

$$SI_{pop} = \frac{1}{N}\sum_i^N P_i(U=1|z_i,x_i)$$

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

where δ_i is the censoring indicator with 1 if t_i is uncensored and 0 otherwise. Obviously, if $\delta_i=1$, 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 drop to zero as $t\rightarrow+\infty$. Note that the better the model fits the data, through covariate vectors z' and x', the more accurate is the estimation of the proportion of SI animals.

Simulation studies

Simulations were conducted to test (i) the ability of the model to estimate the proportion of SI animals and to discriminate covariate effects on the infection risk and incubation duration and (ii) the effect of individual monitoring length on model outputs. We assumed that non-infected (SF) animals would never die from scrapie. Consequently, observations conducted on SF animals were right-censored. SI animals either died from clinical scrapie (uncensored records) or were eliminated from the flock before clinical onset (right-censored). Simulations were performed using (i) genetic and biological parameters (infection rates, ages at clinical death and flock demography) described in scrapie outbreaks or already used in mathematical modelling (simulation design 1) (Matthews et al., 2001+; Hagenaars et al., 2003+; Hopp et al., 2003+; Baylis et al., 2004+; Eglin et al., 2005+; Touzeau et al., 2005+) and (ii) ages at death from scrapie reflecting observations made in our dataset (simulation design 2).

The capacity of the model to separate covariate effects on incidence and incubation length (age at death) was assessed by generating two independent binary covariates, one (Z_1) affecting only the incidence and the other (Z_2) affecting only the incubation duration. The incidence is given the logistic form

$$\pi(z_1, z_2) = \frac{\exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Z_1 + \beta_2 Z_2)}{[1 + \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Z_1 + \beta_2 Z_2)]}$$

where β_1 and β_2 are the effects of covariates Z_1 and Z_2 on the proportion of infected individuals, respectively. Since Z_2 should have no effect on the incidence, β_2 was set to 0. Thus, the proportion of infected animals is

$$\pi(z_1 = 0, z_2) = \frac{\exp(\beta_0)}{[1 + \exp(\beta_0)]}$$

for animals sharing $Z_1 = 0$ and

$$\pi(z_1 = 1, z_2) = \frac{\exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1)}{[1 + \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1)]}$$

for those sharing $Z_1 = 1$. We set $\beta_0 = -0.5$ and $\beta_1 = -1$, so that the corresponding proportions of infected sheep are 37.7 % (animals with $Z_1 = 0$) and 18.22 % (animals with $Z_1 = 1$), respectively.

The log-normal distribution was used as the distribution function for life expectancies of infected animals, with survival function

$$S(t|U = 1) = 1 - \Phi\left[\frac{(\ln t - \mu - \gamma_1 Z_1 - \gamma_2 Z_2)}{\sigma}\right]$$

where Φ is the distribution function of the standard normal law. In contrast to the incidence portion, γ_1 was set to 0, because Z_1 should have no effect on latency, whatever the value of Z_2. In simulation design 1, the scale (μ) and shape (σ) parameters for the log-normal distribution function were set to 1.2 and 0.4, respectively. In the absence of censoring, events of interest (scrapie deaths) were allowed to occur at median age 3.3 years (interquartile range 2.5–4.2,) for individuals with $Z_2 = 0$. We set $\gamma_2 = 0.3$ so that infected individuals with $Z_2 = 1$ would die later, at median age 4.4 years (interquartile range 3.4–5.7). In simulation design 2, we set $\mu = \ln$

2, ϖ=0.5, γ_1=0 and γ_2=0.375, so that median ages at clinical onset were 2.00 (interquartile range 1.5–2.8) and 3.00 years (interquartile range 2.1–4.2) (Fig. 1a).
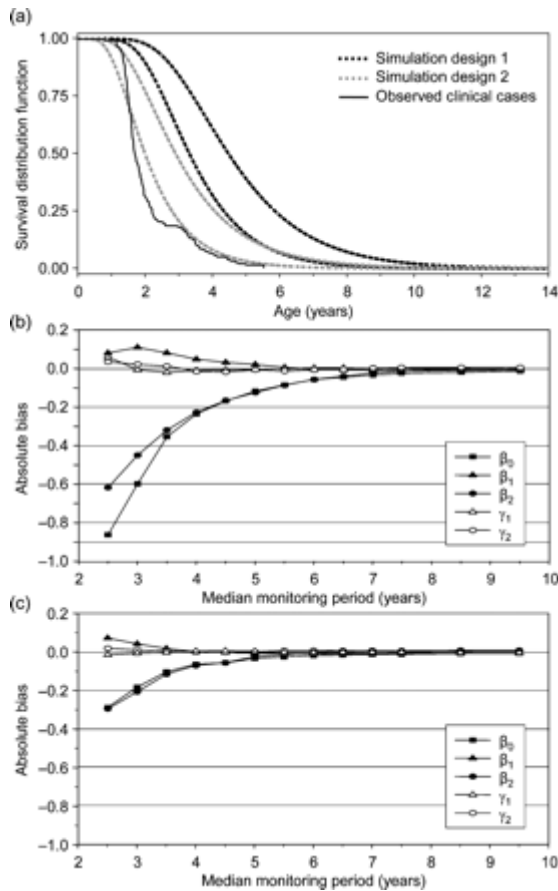

Fig. 1. (a) Simulation design for incubation length. Survival distribution functions for simulation design 1 (median age at onset 3.3 and 4.45 years) and simulation design 2 (median age at onset 2 and 3 years) and survival distribution function for observed scrapie clinical cases in the studied population are shown. (b, c) Absolute bias of estimates for each monitoring scenario (b, simulation design 1; c, simulation design 2) using the mixture cure model: ■(β_0), proportion of infected individuals; ▲(β_1), effect of covariate Z_1 on incidence; ●(β_2), effect of Z_2 on incidence; △(γ_1), effect of covariate Z_1 on latency; ○(γ_2), effect of covariate Z_2 on latency.

Monitoring length was generated according to the Weibull distribution W(λ,ρ), with shape (λ) and scale (ρ) parameters. Thirteen different scenarios were investigated with median life expectancy (meaning monitoring length) ranging from 2.5 to 9.5 years. These scenarios covered a large panel of flock management policies and demography. For each scenario and simulation design, 500 independent datasets, each consisting of 500 individuals, were generated and submitted to model analysis. The absolute biases [B($\tilde{c}$)=$\Sigma_i(\tilde{c}_i - c_0)/500$] and mean squared errors [MSE($\tilde{c}$)=$\Sigma_i(\tilde{c}_i - c_0)^2/500$], where $\tilde{c}_i$ are the estimates of c_0, were computed for the five parameter estimates.

Sample generation and model computations were performed using SAS software (SAS-PC system, Version 8.2 for Windows; SAS Institute).

Flocks.
Investigations were carried out on six naturally scrapie-affected dairy flocks, bred by private farmers, in Pyrénées Atlantiques, France. These flocks had been involved in a long-term scrapie epidemiology research project since 1994 (flock C) and 1998 (the other five flocks). Sheep were all Manech red-faced pure-breeds. Table 1 shows, for each flock, the mean flock size and the estimated year of first occurrence of scrapie. The high incidences of scrapie clinical suspicions (confirmed or not) in ewes born prior to enrolment in the research project suggest different, but nonetheless high, infection pressures (Table 1).

Table 1. Size and within-flock scrapie history for flocks A–F

Parameter	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 birth cohorts	135	70	96	150	90	190

*Flock size at lambing of the studied birth cohorts.

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

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

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

Table 2. PrP genotype distribution and number of clinical scrapie cases in the studied birth cohorts from flocks A–F

Group	PrP genotype	A 1998	B 1999	C 1995	C 1996	C 1997	D 1999	E 1999	F 1999	Total	Clinical cases (n)
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
R/S	ARR/ARQ	28	24	18	15	29	33	34	25	206	9
	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

Apparently healthy culled sheep were submitted for PrP^{Sc} detection on obex and palatine tonsils by ELISA (Platelia BSE detection kit; Bio-Rad) and immunohistochemistry (Andréoletti et al., 2002✦). All the sheep included in our initial sample were not examined, either because of failure to track these animals during the elimination process or because they were still alive at the time of writing (January 2006). From these latter animals, palatine tonsils biopsies were performed each year from 2002 to 2005 (inclusive) for PrP^{Sc} immunohistochemistry detection (Andréoletti et al., 2002✦). To account for missing information, a one-sided 95 % confidence interval for the true proportion of infected animals in each PrP genotype group was calculated using the hypergeometric law.

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

RESULTS

Simulations

As expected, the longer an animal lived (long individual monitoring), the smaller were the mean absolute biases and mean squared errors (MSE, not shown) for the different estimates (Fig. 1b, c✦). Biases and MSE were acceptable for inference when the monitoring time was longer than the median (theoretical) incubation duration. For the first set of simulated incubation times (median age at death 3.3 and 4.45 years), the estimates of the proportion of infected animals (π_0) and the effects of Z_2 on the incidence (β_2) were highly biased (absolute bias over 0.1) for median monitoring times of less than 5.5 years (Fig. 1b✦). For the second set of simulated incubation durations (median age at death 2 and 3.3 years), similar results were obtained for median monitoring times under 3.5 years (Fig. 1c✦). In our population, median age at death in scrapie-affected animals was 1.7 years (Fig. 1a✦; Table 3✦) and the median monitoring time was 4.90 years (Table 4✦). Under these conditions, the model outputs were expected to be relevant in the analysis of our dataset.

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

Percentages are given in parentheses.

Flock	R/R	R/S	S/S	VRQ/x
A	7 (7.90)	29 (32.58)	45 (50.56)	8 (8.99)
B	0 (0)	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) [range]	–	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)			
		25th centile	Median	75th 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

PrP genetic structure of the studied cohorts

Amongst the studied cohorts, the ARQ and ARR alleles were dominant, while AHQ and VRQ alleles were rare (Table 2⬦). The genetic structure of the sample is consistent with previously reported PrP polymorphism frequencies in the Manech red-faced breed (Palhiere *et al.*, 2002⬦).

Because of small numbers of individuals in some PrP genotypes, animals were grouped according to their level of susceptibility to classical scrapie (DEFRA, 2003⬦). ARQ/ARQ, AHQ/AHQ and AHQ/ARQ sheep were considered in a medium-risk group (S/S; $n=343$). ARR/ARQ, ARR/AHQ and ARR/VRQ animals were included in a low-risk group (R/S; $n=212$). ARQ/VRQ, AHQ/VRQ and VRQ/VRQ animals were included in a single high-risk group (VRQ/x; $n=49$) (Table 3⬦). Considering these PrP genotype groups, the genetic

structure was not statistically different in the six selected flocks (chi-square test with 15 degrees of freedom: x^2=15.95, P=0.38).

Scrapie clinical cases

Clinical scrapie cases were mainly observed in ARQ/ARQ (n=131; 77.06 %) and ARQ/VRQ (n=28; 16.47 %) genotypes, while heterozygote ARR were poorly affected (R/S sheep: n=9; 5.29 %) (Tables 2 and 3⬩⬩). High incidences in susceptible PrP genotypes ARQ/ARQ and ARQ/VRQ suggested a high infection pressure. No clinical cases were observed in ARR/ARR (n=37), ARR/VRQ (n=3), ARR/ARH (n=3) or AHQ/VRQ (n=3) animals. However, the number of animals with these last three genotypes was too small to draw any conclusions.

Kaplan–Meier plots of the survival distribution functions for scrapie clinical occurrence indicate the absence of new scrapie cases after 5.54 years, whatever the genotype group considered (Fig. 2⬩). This lack of new clinical cases fulfils two basic requirements that allow the application of the Cox PH mixture cure model, i.e. (i) most or all deaths due to scrapie occurred in a defined age period and (ii) the monitoring length was sufficient to allow almost all infected animals to show clinical signs.
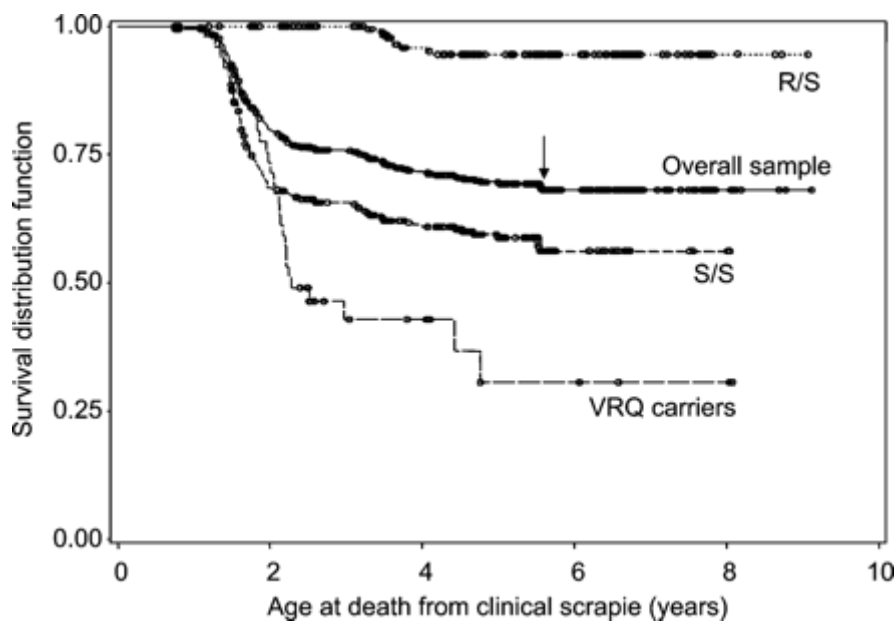

Fig. 2. Kaplan–Meier survival distribution functions for deaths from scrapie in the studied birth cohorts from six flocks of Manech red-faced sheep. Numbers in each group were: 604 (overall sample), 212 (R/S genotype group); 343 (S/S genotype group) and 49 (VRQ allele carrier group). Survival times are measured from date of birth. Censored events (i.e. culling or deaths from causes other than scrapie) are shown as open circles. The last observed clinical case (5.54 years old) is indicated by an arrow.

Monitoring length in clinically healthy sheep

A large number (n=264; 60.83 %) of clinically healthy animals were eliminated by breeders for husbandry reasons at younger ages than the last observed clinical case (Table 4⬩). However, 94.24 % of these symptomless sheep lived longer than the median age at clinical

onset (1.70 years), and 72.12 % reached 3.57 years old, which represented the 90th percentile of the age distribution of scrapie clinical cases.

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

Active detection of subclinically infected sheep

Of the 471 clinically healthy sheep (with no clinical scrapie) eliminated during the study, 220 (46.71 %) were submitted to post-mortem for PrP^{Sc} detection (mean age 4.72 years; 95 % confidence interval 1.87–7.57 years). Sampled animals represented 70 % of VRQ/x and 72.04 % of S/S but only 24.13 % of R/S and 13.51 % of R/R (Table 5◆).

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

			Estimated number (%) of infected sheep	
PrP genotype group	Clinical cases (*n*)	Clinically healthy sheep [positive/tested (total)]	Clinical+subclinical cases (95 % CI)*	Logistic Cox PH 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 SI 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 small proportion of animals sampled.

From the tested animals, only four ARQ/ARQ sheep (aged 1.89, 2.25, 2.32 and 4.39 years) and one ARQ/VRQ sheep (3.04 years) were found to be positive. Fifty-nine animals initially included in the study were still alive at the time of writing (5 ARR/ARR, 42 ARR/ARQ and 12 ARQ/ARQ). No PrP^{Sc} was detected in any of these animals using tonsil biopsy. According to the hypergeometric law, the one-sided 95 % confidence interval for the number of apparently healthy but infected animals eliminated from the flocks was 5–25 (Table 5◆).

Results from the mixture cure model analysis

The deviance statistic test ($x^2_{01}=30.93$; $P<10^{-4}$) indicated that incorporating a scrapie-free fraction provided a better fit to the data than the traditional Cox PH model and that the estimated effects were more relevant.

Proportion of infected animals

ARR/ARR animals were not included in the analysis, because there were no confirmed clinical cases of this genotype. According to the proposed model, the predicted number of subclinically infected animals was 20.75 (respectively 3.65 in the R/S group, 14.83 in the S/S group and 3.22 in the VRQ carrier group; point estimate minus number of clinical cases) (Table 5♦). Strikingly, these predicted numbers were in close agreement with those obtained by the active detection of subclinical cases.

Genotype influence on incidence and incubation duration

Results from the Cox mixture cure model indicated that ARR heterozygote animals were at lower risk of infection than S/S animals (Table 6♦). Conversely, VRQ allele carriers (excluding ARR/VRQ) were at higher risk of being infected. Age at clinical onset was significantly greater in R/S animals when compared with S/S animals. No significant difference was found between S/S and VRQ allele carriers (Table 6♦).

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

OR, Adjusted odds ratio; HR, adjusted hazard risk.

Variable	Incidence			Incubation duration		
	OR	$CI_{95\%}$*	P†	HR	$CI_{95\%}$*	P†
Genotype vs S/S						
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 flock C (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

*95 % confidence interval for OR and HR estimated by the bias-corrected accelerated bootstrap method over 5000 resamples.

†Level of significance of the variable (*P* value). The S/S genotype group and flock C were used as the baseline. The influence of flock could not be investigated in the R/S and VRQ allele carriers groups due to the small numbers of clinical cases in some flocks.

Flock effect on incidence and incubation length

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

DISCUSSION

Working hypothesis

Only a few studies of scrapie outbreaks based on longitudinal monitoring have been published (Elsen *et al.*, 1999✦; Diaz *et al.*, 2005✦). Using survival analysis, they aimed to determine the influence of PrP genotype, rearing type and dam clinical status on individual risk of developing clinical scrapie. Survival analysis assumes intrinsically that if, in an exposed population, a long enough and complete surveillance of individuals is possible, each would experience the event of interest, i.e. clinical scrapie. For TSE, this hypothesis is obviously inadequate. Indeed, under natural exposure, ARR/ARR animals and a large proportion of susceptible-genotype animals will remain uninfected (Elsen *et al.*, 1999✦).

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

(Benestad *et al.*, 2003✦; Le Dur *et al.*, 2005✦). However, atypical scrapie occurs at a very low detected prevalence level (3–11 cases per 10 000 examined) and, in most cases, only one to three cases could be detected in stamped-out affected flocks (De Bosschere *et al.*, 2004✦; Onnasch *et al.*, 2004✦; Orge *et al.*, 2004✦). This implies that approximately 0.2–0.8 sheep could have been infected with atypical scrapie in the considered flocks, which is negligible when compared with the number of classical scrapie cases in the studied cohorts (*n*=170). At the population level, the influence of an atypical case on the model outputs was considered to be negligible.

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

Asymptomatic culled animals

The mixture cure model approach enabled us to estimate the number of infected individuals and included those eliminated while incubating the disease. Model outputs and laboratory findings were in close agreement and indicated that a very small number of sheep were removed while incubating scrapie.

This result is consistent with observations from another study based on a longitudinal survey in a Texel flock (Baylis *et al.*, 2002✦). It contrasts, however, with other publications in which large numbers of scrapie-incubating animals were reported (Thorgeirsdottir *et al.*, 2002✦; Billinis *et al.*, 2004✦). Similarly, the modelling of a scrapie outbreak in a Cheviot flock predicted a high ratio of infections to cases (2.2 : 1) (Matthews *et al.*, 2001✦).

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

Genetic susceptibility to scrapie and incubation period

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

Incubation length is a major feature of TSE phenotype. In our population, while clinical signs were delayed in ARR heterozygotes compared with ARQ homozygotes, no difference could

be observed between ARQ/VRQ carriers and ARQ homozygotes. A similar phenomenon was observed in an Irish flock (O'Doherty *et al.*, 2002▾). However, it differed from estimations obtained in a French Romanov flock (Elsen *et al.*, 1999▾) and in a Texel flock (Baylis *et al.*, 2002▾). In both these naturally affected scrapie flocks, significant differences in age at death were reported between ARQ/ARQ and ARQ/VRQ.

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

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

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

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

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