

INFORMATION PAPER

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD (ACMSF)

REVIEW OF RISK ASSESSMENT

1. 1. Following the Downing Street farming meeting on 30 March, the Government published “An Action Plan for Farming” containing the following section on risk assessment :-

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- The Government’s aim is to use proportionate measures to protect the consumer from risks associated with food. The scientific committees that advise Government on food safety have a key and valued role to play through their assessment of risk. The transfer of responsibility for food safety matters to the new Food Standards Agency provides us with an opportunity to look again at how risk assessment can best be managed across the committees.
 - The Prime Minister has asked that a review should be conducted by Sir Robert May (the Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser), Professor Liam Donaldson (Chief Medical Officer for England) and Sir John Krebs (Chairman of the Food Standards Agency). The Chief Veterinary Officer (Jim Scudamore) and Dr Jim McQuaid (a Risk Consultant) are also members of the Group.

2. The terms of reference of the Review Group are to :-

- review the principles and procedures of risk assessment used by the Government’s scientific committees that deal with food safety;
- consider and recommend in the light of this review what strengthening of risk assessment procedures could beneficially be implemented by the committees;
- consider and recommend improvements to the committee’s risk management and risk communication practices that follow from recommendations on risk assessment.”

3. In order to progress its task as rapidly as possible, the Review Group decided to meet scientific advisory committee chairmen, including Professor Georgala. Other advisory bodies participating in the exercise are listed at Annex A.
4. By way of preparation for the Review Group meeting, committees were asked to provide a brief note about the ways in which they handle questions of risk. The note provided by Professor Georgala is at Annex B.
5. Professor Georgala will provide Members with an oral report on progress.

Secretariat
25 May 2000

ANNEX A

OTHER ADVISORY BODIES PARTICIPATING IN REVIEW OF RISK ASSESSMENT

Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs

Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes

Advisory Committee on Pesticides

Advisory Group on Veterinary Residues (becoming the Veterinary Residues Committee)

Committee on Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment

Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Nutrition Policy (becoming the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition)

Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment

Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment

Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals

Pesticides Residues Committee

Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee

Veterinary Products Committee

Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food

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Sir Robert May
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28 April 2000

Dear Sir Robert

RISK ANALYSIS

1. Thank you for your letter of 19 April inviting me to participate on behalf of the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) in your review into the way risk assessment is used by Government scientific advisory committees. I am delighted to do so and hope that you will find the information contained in this letter helpful.
2. By way of background, the ACMSF was set up in 1990 to advise UK Agriculture and Health Ministers on the microbiological safety of food. Under the new arrangements operating from 1 April 2000, the Committee reports to the Food Standards Agency (FSA). ACMSF membership is currently drawn from microbiology; the medical and veterinary professions; the food industry; food science, retailing and research; consumer affairs; and public and environmental health. In addition, to assist the Committee in its detailed consideration of specific topics, external expertise is co-opted on to Working Groups in support of ACMSF members. This broad range of interests and expertise has helped the Committee discharge its remit across the whole food chain from "farm to fork".
3. In the area of risk analysis, the Committee's principal role has been in relation to risk assessment. We have undertaken in-depth studies on vacuum packaging and associated processes; *Salmonella* in eggs; *Campylobacter*, verocytotoxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (VTEC); poultry meat; foodborne viral infections; and microbial antibiotic resistance in relation to food safety and have provided Government with wide-ranging advice in our reports on these issues. These reports have been published by Ministers,

together with the Government's response to our recommendations. We are currently revisiting *Salmonella* in eggs to assess the need for further interventions. Our future work programme will include a further look at the *Campylobacter* issue, following our interim report of 1993. We shall also consider why risk control is not being universally applied amongst small and medium size enterprises in food manufacturing and catering, and in the domestic environment. We shall also, for example, be taking stock of the public health implications of recent outbreaks of listeriosis, and looking at the potential risks associated with ready-to-eat fruit and vegetables.

4. In addition to the recommendations made in our major reports, the Committee has regularly provided advice on a wide range of issues concerning the microbiological safety of food in response to requests by Government Departments. Topics include raw milk and raw milk cheeses, New York dressed poultry, agricultural disposal of sewage sludge, *Mycobacterium paratuberculosis* (MPTB) in milk, infectious salmon anaemia and the pathogenicity of *Listeria monocytogenes*. The Committee's advice is also routinely sought on the public health implications of the results of Government-funded microbiological food safety surveillance and research. As indicated earlier, our advice about risk has traditionally been communicated to the UK Agriculture and Health Departments, in accordance with the remit which we received from Government. From 1 April 2000, the recipient of our advice became the Food Standards Agency.

5. Whilst the Committee's principal involvement has been with risk assessment, we have also been able to suggest risk management measures to Government. Many detailed risk management recommendations are contained in our subject-specific reports and in the advice we provide to Government on the *ad hoc* questions referred to us. A practical example to illustrate the Committee's contribution to risk management is the revised cooking instructions for burgers and similar raw minced meat products, aimed at avoiding exposure to VTEC infection. These formed the basis of Chief Medical Officer advice issued in July 1998. For the future, the ACMSF will continue to offer Government a suite of options for managing particular risks.

6. Risk communication presents the Committee with different challenges and we are committed to develop our thinking on how best to promulgate microbiological food safety messages against the background of the Government's policy of greater openness. We have already taken some important steps to improve public access to our work and outputs. A dedicated website contains details of the Committee and our published annual and subject-specific reports. We also publish our agendas, minutes and papers and we shall be holding at least one open meeting a year. We have also provided experts for media interviews on an *ad hoc* basis, to assist the Government's handling of a number of live issues. Recent examples include sewage sludge in French animal feed; and MPTB in pasteurised milk. However, ACMSF involvement in risk communication has hitherto been largely reactive and this is an area where we could, in cooperation with the FSA, be more proactive.

7. I hope the above provides the information you require. If you need anything more, perhaps you would let Colin Mylchreest (the Committee's Administrative Secretary – details above) know.

8. I look forward to meeting you and the other members of the Group in due course.

Yours sincerely

Professor Douglas L Georgala