

DISCUSSION PAPER

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD (ACMSF)

MICROBIOLOGICAL FOOD SURVEILLANCE

Purpose

1. This paper, which has been prepared at the request of the Chairman, proposes the creation of a “standing” ACMSF Working Group to offer advice in connection with Government-funded microbiological food surveillance, and surveillance of animal and human infection.

Background

2. The Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (the Richmond Committee) recommended that the Government should establish a national microbiological food surveillance and assessment system. In 1990,^{1,2} in response to this recommendation, the Government created :-

- the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) to bring outside expertise to bear on deciding on the areas which require surveillance, on the interpretation of the results of surveillance, and on the policy formulation process;
- the Steering Group on the Microbiological Safety of Food (SGMSF) to manage surveillance and research and present policy conclusions to Government.

1995 Review

3. In 1995, following a review of these arrangements, the Government announced³ that it had decided to merge the ACMSF and the SGMSF to ensure more efficient and streamlined consideration of food safety issues. The announcement noted that, in the future, the ACMSF, in addition to its existing responsibilities, would also be asked to advise on the Government’s microbiological food surveillance programme which had hitherto been the main task of the SGMSF.

4. Under these new arrangements, the Government set up two small Departmental groups (which included external members):-

- the Epidemiology of Foodborne Infections Group (EFIG), to coordinate surveillance of animal and human infection and to identify through surveillance the need for action to ensure the microbiological safety of food; and
- the Microbiological Food Surveillance Group (MFSG), to perform a similar function in relation to the Government's microbiological food surveillance programme.

ACMSF's involvement since 1995

5. As part of its extended remit in respect of surveillance, the ACMSF has :-

- received regular reports on the work of EFIG and MFSG;
- commented on a draft strategy and forward work programmes for MFSG, and on DH's food safety and research strategy;
- agreed with Departments arrangements to ensure that ACMSF members are regularly informed of, and are able to comment on, the results of microbiological food surveillance projects;
- advised on the public health implications of results from MAFF and DH-funded microbiological food surveillance projects;
- commented on papers explaining the principles on which Departments proposed to conduct microbiological food surveillance, and dealing with the use of statistics in such surveillance.

6. In its comments to Departments, the Committee has consistently stressed the need for good practice and systematic planning. Members have pointed to the need for good study design, particularly random sampling. The need has been emphasised of deciding first what questions a proposed survey is designed to answer and then designing the survey, with appropriate statistical input, to answer the identified questions.

Further refining ACMSF involvement

7. The Committee has clearly been able to offer advice on the broad principles for the conduct of microbiological food surveillance, and has also been able to take a view of the public health implications of the results of individual projects. However, there has been little input at the planning stages. Such input would

have been of significant assistance to funding Departments in ensuring that proposed surveillance was needed, was appropriately targeted given the desired objectives, was well planned, and was able to provide a representative and relevant picture. Early ACMSF assistance could also help shorten the time period which elapses between the initial stage of identifying the possible need for surveillance, and the ultimate stage, publishing the final report and results.

8. The Chairman therefore proposes that the Committee should agree to set up a “standing” Working Group of perhaps 3-4 members who could meet with funders on an *ad hoc* basis to assist them in the design of future microbiological food surveillance projects. This should also benefit members’ subsequent consideration of the results of individual projects, particularly in explaining the background to the aims and design.

Recommendation

9. The Chairman invites members to agree to the setting up of a standing Surveillance Working Group to facilitate the ACMSF’s work on this subject.

1. Department of Health press release 90/286 of 12 June 1990. Arrangements introduced to strengthen food safety measures.

2. Department of Health press release H91/20 of 17 January 1991. Stephen Dorrell announces terms of reference of Advisory Committee and Steering Group on Microbiological Safety of Food.

3. Department of Health press release 95\217 of 3 May 1995. Advisory Committee and Steering Group on the Microbiological Safety of Food to merge and appointments to the new committee announced.

Secretariat
May 2000