

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD

RISK ASSESSMENT

Issue

1. The ACMSF has undertaken to consider introducing a more formal structure to its risk assessment work. Members are invited to agree that this process might best be taken forward through the medium of an *Ad Hoc* Group.

Review of risk procedures

2. In March 2000, the then Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Robert May, was asked (together with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chairman of the Food Standards Agency) to undertake a review of the way in which Government scientific committees dealing with food safety handle risk. The ACMSF was one of the Committee's invited to participate in the review process.

The ACMSF's role in risk analysis

3. In written evidence to the May Group in April 2000,¹ the ACMSF explained that, in the area of risk analysis, its principal role was in relation to **risk assessment**. The Committee had undertaken a range of in-depth studies (on eg. vacuum packaging, *Salmonella* in eggs, *Campylobacter*, VTEC, etc) and had provided Government with wide-ranging advice in its reports on these issues. Other areas for ACMSF attention had been identified as part of a forward look exercise; and in addition to the recommendations contained in the Committee's major subject-specific reports, advice had been regularly provided on a wide range of issues concerning the microbiological safety of food in response to requests by Government Departments.
4. In the ACMSF's evidence to the May Group, it was also explained that, whilst the Committee's principal involvement was with risk assessment, it had also been able to suggest **risk management** measures to Government. Many detailed risk management recommendations were contained in the Committee's subject-specific reports, and in its advice to Government on a range of *ad hoc* questions.
5. Finally, it was pointed out that the ACMSF was developing a **risk communication** capability, to support the Government own

¹ ACMSF Annual Report 2000, Annex V.

communications output. The Committee was also strongly committed to opening up its work to greater public scrutiny (through the publication of agendas, minutes, and papers, open meetings, a website, etc) in line with the Government's own commitment to greater openness.

The May Group Report

6. The May Group's report was published in July 2000.² The Group's conclusions fell into 2 categories.
7. As regards the relationship between the Government and the committees, the Group concluded that :
 - Departments and agencies should ensure that the right questions were asked of their advisory committees when seeking advice on the assessment of a particular risk;
 - Departments and agencies should set out any constraints when asking advisory committees to advise on risk management options;
 - Government, and not its advisory committees, was responsible for taking decisions on the management of risk and needed to take an abiding interest in matters of risk, although committees might be best placed to advise on management options;
 - the distinction between voluntary and involuntary risk, the needs of vulnerable groups, as well as the implications of risk management standards, needed to be fully recognised by both Government and the advisory committees.
8. In relation to best practice for committees, the Group concluded that :
 - advisory committees would usually be helped by following a formal structure for the process of risk assessment, even when the scientific facts were cloudy, disputed or even unknown;
 - advisory committees should be open at all stages of the risk assessment process and in their consideration of options for risk management, and find ways of being as open as possible when there were commercial confidentiality constraints;
 - training should be made generally available to the members and secretariats of advisory committees to enable them to convey the complexities and uncertainties surrounding some food safety issues. Cabinet Office would be asked to facilitate this;

² Department of Trade and Industry. Review of risk procedures used by the Government's advisory committees dealing with food safety. Report of the group led by Sir Robert May, Chief Scientific Adviser. July 2000.

- advisory committees dealing with food safety issues should establish better links and lines of communications with each other in order to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to risk. These might be achieved through cross-membership, occasional joint meetings, circulation of papers, or discussions between the secretariats;
- advisory committees should, when appropriate, set out a range of risk management options for policy makers, together with their implications, to avoid placing unnecessary constraints upon the decision-making process.

Follow up to May

9. By way of follow up to the May Group report, the Chairman of the Food Standards Agency wrote drawing the attention of the scientific advisory committees, including the ACMSF, to the outcome of the review, suggesting that each of the committees might include a discussion of the report in one of their forthcoming meetings, and asking to be informed of the actions they decided to take in response to the May Report recommendations. The Chief Medical Officer also wrote in similar terms. In an interim reply in September 2000, the ACMSF confirmed that it was already implementing best practice in many of the areas identified in the May Report, including endeavouring to offer policy makers a range of risk management options, and in opening up the Committee's work to greater public scrutiny. The reply also noted that there was scope for the ACMSF to explore other issues, including the feasibility of formulating a more formal risk assessment structure. An undertaking was provided to discuss the May Report at a future ACMSF meeting.

ACMSF discussion of May

10. The May Report was discussed by the full ACMSF on 5 December 2000³ and a letter reporting the outcome of that meeting was sent to Sir John Krebs, copied to Professor Liam Donaldson, in January 2001.⁴ That letter :
 - recognised the potential advantages which might flow from the adoption of a more formal structure for the process of risk assessment. It noted that the ACMSF had some experience of using risk assessment in its work but would carefully explore additional options;
 - gave an undertaking that the ACMSF would continue to be as open as possible at all stages of the risk assessment process;
 - supported the training initiatives recommended by May;

³ ACM/MIN/39(FINAL) section 14.

⁴ ACMSF Annual Report 2000, Annex VI.

- supported the enhancement of links with other advisory committees;
- indicated the ACMSF's commitment to continuing to seek to offer policy makers a range of risk management options.

Next steps on risk assessment

11. The ACMSF is still to fulfil its commitment to carefully explore additional options for introducing a more formal structure for the process of risk assessment. It is recommended that this should now be taken forward through the medium of a small *Ad Hoc* Group. The terms of reference of such a Group might be :
 - to consider whether the ACMSF would be helped by following a formal structure for the process of risk assessment;
 - if so, to recommend an appropriate structure which might be adopted; and
 - to report back, with recommendations, to the ACMSF.
12. Members are also invited to agree that Professor Georgala should discuss with the Secretariat the membership of the *Ad Hoc* Group and should then hold bilateral discussions with individual members about joining the Group.
13. Members' comments are invited.

**Secretariat
March 2002**