

Independent scientific advice

We must preserve it for effective policy making, argues **Phil Willis**



Following the creation of the new Department of Business Innovation and Skills, the decision to re-establish the Science and Technology Select Committee to scrutinise science across government was greeted with enthusiasm by the science community at large. The principle of scrutiny goes right to the heart of what scientists do.

Successive Government Chief Scientific Advisers, from Lord May to Professor John Beddington, have pursued this goal with increased vigour. This is hardly surprising. Indeed it was under the stewardship of Sir David King that we saw an increasing number of government departments appointing 'independent' departmental science advisers to assist in this dual process of policy scrutiny and scientific advice. To his credit, John Beddington has even persuaded the Treasury to have a Chief Scientific Adviser!

Many departments have gone further – setting up Scientific Advisory Committees or Councils to assist ministers by collating and making judgements about scientific information and then providing expert advice. The government has no fewer than 75 such advisory committees, ranging from the Administration of Radioactive Substances Advisory Committee to the Zoos Forum.

Protection from ministerial pressure

Just how independent are these new guardians of scientific advice? How effective are they in getting government ministers to listen, or indeed respond to the call for evidence on which to base advice? And what happens when advice appears to contradict policy initiatives?

It is of course important to state that, when ministers announce policy initiatives or indeed change policy, they have to take into consideration

more than scientific advice. Manifesto commitments, public reaction, political considerations, personal judgement all come into play. What is absolutely crucial is making clear on what basis a decision is made, and why scientific advice is being ignored or not acted upon.

However, to preserve its integrity, scientific advice must be independent of government, and those offering it must be protected from undue influence or ministerial pressure.

Put to the test

These principles were put to the test only last year when Professor John Nutt, the Chairman of the Home Office Advisory Committee for the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), writing in his capacity as an eminent neuropsychopharmacologist, compared the relative harm in society caused by taking ecstasy. 'Drug harm can be equal to harms in other parts of life. There is not much difference between horse-riding and ecstasy,' he said.

Professor Nutt's comments were seized upon by the then Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, who not only demanded an apology but sought to link his remarks to his work as Chairman of the ACMD. In the face of a media storm, few came immediately to Nutt's defence – including the Government Chief Scientific Adviser. Gradually, however, the scientific community rallied; so important was it to stand up for the principle of independent scientific thought.

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Scrutiny needs scientists

What this incident did was to question whether eminent scientists should put their own careers and reputations on the line if their views were to be so readily attacked with so little understanding of scientific method. After all, Nutt was using risk comparison in a way widely used by social scientists to explain risk to the public. What was equally important: should scientists be able to continue publishing their own research if it conflicts with areas of public policy being considered by advisory committees on which they sit?

The reality is that they must be prepared to offer advice and be prepared to explain that advice without fear or political intimidation. The advent of Scientific Advisory Committees, Departmental Scientific Advisers and the Government Chief Scientific Advisers shows hugely important commitments by successive governments to scientific evidence and advice in policy making. However, without the scientists to take part, these initiatives will fail – and so will effective policy making.



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