The politics of food safety: risk, science and public trust

Has the international community failed to heed Britain's hard-won experience on food safety, risk and consumer confidence?

In a letter published last week in Nature, leading environmental researchers from Sussex and other UK universities point to some serious weaknesses in the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) current approach to risk assessment and product safety. The third WTO Ministerial Conference - the organisation's highest-level decision-making body - has been taking place in Seattle this week.

The letter draws on evidence collected as part of the UK's largest-ever social-science research initiative - the Global Environmental Change Programme (GECP) of the Economic and Science Research Council (ESRC). The programme is co-directed by Dr. Frans Berkhout from SPRU and Dr. Ian Scoones and Dr. Melissa Leach from IDS. In Nature they and their academic colleagues argue that the WTO needs to be more rigorous and more precautionary in its use of regulatory science if it is adequately to address issues of sustainability.

"The WTO's current approach to risk issues means that new technologies are effectively assumed safe until proven otherwise. This places excessive faith in our limited knowledge about their safety," says SPRU's Alister Scott, who is Assistant Director of the GECP and co-ordinator of the letter. "The opposite is needed: better testing of new products and more thorough monitoring of their effects on the environment and people's health once in use."

The research team developed this argument in a major new report, The Politics of GM Food: Risk, Science and Public Trust, which was launched at Westminster with a briefing for MPs, peers and officials from several government departments.

Continued on page 3.

Seasonal greetings cards for sale

This year's card shows colourful Christmas lights (shown above), on a jade green background. For a full-colour version, see the web at www.sussex.ac.uk/information_office/bulletin/

The cards cost 40p each (or 35p each for orders of more than 10) and are available from the Information Office in Sussex House, tel. (67)8888 or email information@sussex.ac.uk

Lasers in manufacturing

6.30pm Tuesday 7th December

Chris Chatwin
Director of Manufacturing Systems

Public lecture all welcome! Chichester Lecture Theatre University of Sussex

Chemicals offer potential for cancer cure

Scientists in CPES have beaten off applications from around the world to win funding to investigate a potential cure for cancer. The team will be studying a family of rare but highly poisonous chemicals - called dienediynes - that have strong anti-cancer properties, thought to be due to their ability to bind to the DNA inside cancer cells. The researchers will focus on creating a synthetic version of the naturally occurring agent.

The group, headed by Dr. Stephen Caddick, was awarded the £98,400 grant by the Association for International Cancer Research (AICR), which backs cancer research all over the world. "Competition for our grants is fierce and the projects which win them represent the cream of the crop in international scientific research into cancer," said Derek Napier, AICR chief executive. The funding from the AICR is in addition to grants already received by Glaxo Wellcome.

Because they are so poisonous, naturally occurring dienediynes cannot be used as anticancer drugs. Stephen and his research group are aiming to create over the next three years a whole range of innocuous synthetic dienediynes, with a variety of chemical structures, that would be safer to use in the treatment of cancer patients.

Stephen said: "We will be testing these new, designer dienediynes to examine how they are activated and bind to DNA. Once this is understood, it will be much easier for us to synthesise simple, less poisonous, dienediynes that will be effective anti-cancer drugs."
Societies

Gospel Choir Society

Sam Wilkinson, a 3rd-year Music student, tells us all about the society he set up two years ago...

"The gospel choir started actually as a group of friends – about eight of us – and we just decided to get together and sing. We were just doing it for the fun of it, but we advertised and we ended up having 35 people taking part.

If people haven’t sung before it doesn’t really matter. That’s the thing about gospel music – if you can sing in tune, that’s the only requirement. You don’t need to be ‘into’ gospel to take part, you just need to like the music and like singing. I tend to teach orally too, so you don’t even have to be able to read music. It’s just a matter of listening. I play a note, or I give a word sometimes, and people can take the cue from there.

It’s very easy in that respect, but then you need to get used to the gospel style. We sing mainly religious songs – that’s what gospel music is. The arrangements are quite simple, once you know the language, and so are the harmonies. But to get it right you’ve got to practise it over and over again. We might only learn four songs a term because we work so hard on getting each one right. I tend to avoid the commercial gospel songs too, and some of what we sing is stuff I’ve written myself. I also do my own arrangements of well-known songs, which is sometimes easier because you can do it your own way with nothing to compare it to.

There tend to be more women than men in the choir. We only have about seven guys and the rest are women. At the moment, it’s all students, too. Some of them are a bit older, in their twenties. If someone is a bit older than that came along, it would be fine. It’s all about singing at the end of the day, and age is not really a problem.

The main performance we do is at the Afro-Caribbean Society’s cultural evening. We have held a Christmas concert in the past, which is like a version of the Christmas story, singing gospel versions of the carols and stuff. It’s good to – I try to – have something to aim for with the singing. It makes the whole thing more inspiring."

Factfile

• Name: The Gospel Choir Society.
• Age: Two years old.
• Membership: Around 20.
• Cost: £3.
• Time and place: Wednesday afternoons, 4.00pm until 6.00pm. In the Music Room, Gardner Arts Centre.
• Special equipment: None.
• How to join: Anyone can join. The best time to join is at the beginning of a term.
• Contact: Sam Wilkinson, email fdvu1@central.sussex.ac.uk

MORI survey of scientists

Some 1,600 researchers will be asked for their views on communicating their work and its implications to the general public and policy-makers. The survey will be conducted by MORI on behalf of the Wellcome Trust and the Office of Science and Technology. The researchers will be asked how they see their role and responsibilities in communicating science, whether they feel equipped to explain their work and its implications and what they see as the barriers to better communication.

MORI have been interviewing since mid-November and expect fieldwork to continue through to February. Interviewers will be approaching individual scientists either by telephone or in person at their departmental offices.

Elections to the General Teaching Council

The General Teaching Council for England is currently being established. It is intended that the Council will empower teachers to have a much stronger influence on national education policy and will improve the position of the profession in the future. Members of the University with Qualified Teacher Status are encouraged to vote in the forthcoming elections for the Council.

For more information about the Council and to register to vote (closing date 15 December), see the GTC website at www.gtc.org.uk

Diploma students need places to stay

Accommodation is required for approximately 25 scholars who will be studying for the SEI's Diploma in Contemporary European Studies, which runs for 12 weeks from January 2000. The students are all young professionals who are primarily from Central and East European countries. This is an important programme and offers to accommodate these students during their 12 weeks here would be gratefully received. Contact Jenny Nye in the Housing Office on ext. 8220 if you can help.
The politics of food safety:
risk, science and public trust

Continued from front page.

The report summarises evidence on the GM food debate collected as one part of the £15 million, ten-year GECP programme, which involves over 350 researchers in 150 projects.

According to the report, government needs improved ways of making decisions about such new technologies, whose long-term environmental effects are uncertain. "We are quite simply ignorant of the likely range of their potential impacts", says Alister, who edited the report.

The researchers argue that regulators need to take full account of public concerns about the cultural, legal, ethical and political issues raised by the new technologies, as well as the scientific and environmental issues. Government and industry, say the researchers, should build on existing limited attempts to include wider public participation in decision-making (such as the use of consensus conferences and focus groups), recognising that the public have a sophisticated grasp of the main issues.

In addition, they need to recognise that science cannot provide definitive answers about the safety of new technologies. 'Current approaches neglect the scientific basis for dealing with ignorance and fail to recognise that the underlying assumptions used at the start of the process of risk assessment can significantly affect the outcome" says one of the authors, Dr Andy Stirling, from SPRU.

The report recommends a wider understanding of the nature of risk, greater openness, more rigorous scientific monitoring of effects and a willingness to adapt policy decisions on the basis of evidence from a wide range of sources. Only then, it says, is the crucial ingredient of trust likely to come back into the public's view of managing change.

Government Chief Scientist Professor Sir Bob May has already accepted the main findings of the report. Michael Meacher MP, the Environment Minister, denied in an interview on the 'Today' programme that the government was out of touch with the public, but recognised the uncertainties surrounding GM technologies.

In the next few weeks the authors of the report will be at Westminster once more to bend the ears of a government minister. Dr Mo Mowlam MP, who has overarching government responsibility for GM food as Cabinet Office Minister, has asked to be briefed in person on the contents of the report. Over the coming months the environmental researchers from SPRU and IDS will watch with interest to see whether Dr Mowlam and her fellow politicians take on board their findings and begin to change the climate of mistrust around GM foods.

Books

A selection of recent and forthcoming publications by Sussex authors, all obtainable from Sussex University Bookshop:

State Strategies and the Global Political Economy
Rowen Palan, University of Sussex
Jason Abbott, Nottingham Trent University
Sept 99 Pinter paper £14.99
isbn 1855676389

Vectors of Memory
Nancy Wood
Sept 99 Berg £14.99 isbn 1859732941

Art and the Temptation of Suspicion
Gabriel Josipovici
Sept 99 Yale Uni Press cloth £18.95
isbn 0300079915

Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Metissage
Françoise Vergès
May 99 Duke Uni Press paper £14.95
isbn 0822322625

Foreign Direct Investment and Technology Transfer in the Former Soviet Union
ed by David Dyker
July 99 Edward Elgar £59.95
isbn 1858989175

Technology, Management and Systems of Innovation
Keith Pavitt
June 99 Edward Elgar £59.95
isbn 1858988748

Digital Convergence, The Information Revolution
John Vince & R. A. Earnshaw
May 99 Springer Verlag £50.00
isbn 1852331402
Includes chapter by Dr A L Thomas

The Electricity Supply Industry of Europe, Organisation, Regulation and Performance
ed by Gordon Mackeron & Luis de Paoli
Dec 99 Earthscan cloth £60.00
isbn 185385663X

Teaching Culture, The Long Revolution in Culture Studies
ed by Nannette Aldred & Martin Ryle
May 99 NIACE £14.95 isbn 1862010455

In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on music, Ernest Bloch Lectures
Jonathan Harvey
May 99 Uni California Press cloth with CD £25.00 isbn 0520213920

Research funding opportunities
This is a selection of research opportunities. More details of these and other opportunities are available from the Research Grants & Contracts Office. Contact Debbie, ext. 3812 or email D.Foy-Everett@sussex.ac.uk. For an extensive listing of funding opportunities see REFUND on the Research Web site: http://www.rsc.sussex.ac.uk/Units/research or USIS home page, under Research.

The Paul Mellon Centre for British Art is inviting applications for its various Fellowship schemes including: Senior Fellowships, Postdoctoral Fellowships, Junior Fellowships, and Travel Fellowships. Deadline 15 January 2000

The ESRC, in collaboration with the MRC, is inviting outline proposals in the innovative health technologies research programme. Projects should address the interaction between innovative health technologies and wider changes in society. Deadline 17 January 2000

The ESRC is inviting proposals under its Future of Work programme. Areas to be addressed are: workplaces for the future; labour markets of the 21st century; and the future of employee relations. Deadline 24 January 2000

The American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science invites nomination for the 2000 biennial women and science award. The award is a $25,000 research grant and aims to recognise achievement and provide a valuable role model for the next generation of women scientists. Deadline 28 January 2000

The AHHRB's Research Centres Scheme is designed to support existing as well as new research centres and will provide funding for five years up to a maximum level of £875,000. Deadline 31 January 2000

The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre at the University of Texas is offering three-month fellowships to scholars who wish to engage in postdoctoral research requiring substantial on-site use of the Centre's collections next Summer. Deadline 1 February 2000

The Scottish Executive and the BBSRC are inviting applications to a new initiative called 'biological interactions in the root environment'. The aim is to create the biological knowledge necessary to manipulate, engineer and model the rhizosphere for the benefit of plant productivity, soil fertility and environmental protection. Deadline 14 February 2000

The European Chemical Industry Council is inviting applications for funding of basic research into health and environmental effects of chemicals. Two research areas: marine risk assessment and ecosystem dynamics; and validation of regional and global multi media fate and transport models. Deadline 15 February 2000.
Noticeboard

Lectures, Seminars, Colloquia

- **Monday 6 December**
  - 12.30pm Sussex Continuing Education Research Forum: Peter Jarvis (Surrey), Practitioner research and the education of adults. D310.
  - 1.00pm Experimental Psychology Lunchtime Seminar: Jane Oakhill, Evidence of immediate activation of gender information from a social role name. BLR.
  - 4.00pm Sociology and Social Psychology Seminar: Rosemary Crompton (City University), Employment and caring in Britain, France and Norway. D310.
  - 4.30pm Neuroscience Seminar: TBA. BLR.
  - 5.00pm Women's Studies RIP Seminar: Susan Hayward (Exeter), Simone Signoret. A71.

- **Tuesday 7 December**
  - 12.30pm Centre for Life History Research Seminar: Margaretta Jolly, Defining a field: The encyclopaedia of life writing. Library Seminar Room.
  - 2.15pm SEI Plenum: An open forum for all SEI students and staff. A71.
  - 4.15pm Biochemistry and Genetics and Development Seminar: Lee Sweetlove (Oxford), The control of carbohydrate metabolism in plants. BLT.
  - 5.00pm Media Studies Graduate Seminar: Phil Wickham (SIHE), If you didn’t laugh, you’d cry: The dark side of the British sitcom. EDB 125.
  - 5.15pm German Research Colloquium: Alfred Bader (Milwaukee), Setting the record straight: The discoveries of Josef Loschmidt and August Kekulé. A155.

- **Wednesday 8 December**
  - 1.00pm IDS Seminar: Richard Crook, Colonialism, legal traditions and access to justice. Room 221.

- **Thursday 9 December**
  - 4.00pm Experimental Psychology Colloquium: Robert Rogers, title TBA. BLR.
  - 5.00pm Economics Faculty/Graduate Seminar: Federico Trionfetti (LSE), On the home market effect: Theory and empirical evidence, D510.
  - 5.00pm History Work in Progress: Bob Benewick, Images of power: Mao Zedong’s little red book. A155.

Friday 10 December

- **2.15pm SPRU Seminar:** Sylvan Katz, The self-similar science system. EDB 121.
- **4.00pm Chemical Physics and Materials Seminar:** John Venables and J. Harding, Nucleation and growth of supported metal clusters on ionic materials. CHI 3-3R241.
- **4.00pm Applied Mathematics and Numerical Analysis Seminar:** G. Barnes (Oxford), Mathematical modelling of superconductors in engineering applications. PEV1-2B13.

Sportcentre

New Get Fit, Get Active out now for the spring term. Book in advance for any course (except workshops and back care courses) before 5.00pm on Sunday 9 January and get a £2.50 reduction on each course you sign up for. Payment can be made by telephone with Visa or MasterCard.

New courses for the spring term:
- Pilates and Chi Ball on Mondays from 12.00-1.00pm, 8-week course: Students/staff £20.00, public £24.00.
- Boxercise on Tuesdays from 1.00-2.00pm, 8-week course: Students/staff £18.00, public £22.00.
- Contemporary jazz dance on Wednesdays from 11.00am-12.00 noon, 8-week course: Students/staff £18.00, public £22.00.
- Astanga yoga on Thursdays from 6.00-8.00pm, 8-week course: Students/staff £36.00, public £44.00.
- Odesi Indian dance on Fridays from 5.00-6.00pm, 8-week course: Students/staff £18.00, public £22.00.
- Intermediate badminton on Fridays from 7.00-8.00pm, 8-week course: Students/staff £24.00, public £28.00.

Courses

Teaching English as a Foreign Language: Thinking of TEFL as a career? Planning a year abroad? The SLI runs a one-week intensive Initial Teacher Training for TEFL course at the end of every term. The next course dates are 13-17 December 1999. Fee: £135.00. For further details and enrolment form contact Linda Gunn, Arts B131, ext. 2175 or the SLI Reception, Arts A, ext. 8006.

Language Courses: Begin a new millennium with a new language! Nine-week open courses run by Euro will start in January – including French, Spanish, German, Italian and Latin. Enrol now – brilliant value at just £35 per staff and students. Full details available from Sophie Richards, EURO, ext. 7258 or email opencourses@sussex.ac.uk

Small ads

As the Bulletin is being produced fortnightly there is less space on the back page for small ads. All adverts sent in will be displayed on the web version. Please try to keep adverts to 20 words or less.

The meeting place of all the worlds

Carols and readings by candlelight

Sunday 5 December 1999 at 6.00 pm

In the Meeting House Chapel followed by mulled wine and mince pies

This year’s Meeting House appeal is in aid of The Sussex Beacon

POPPY APPEAL: The British Legion would like to thank all who helped and contributed to the campus appeal, which raised £656.95.

FOR SALE: Apple Mac Performa 600 with monitor, Stylewriter printer and Robotics modem. Software includes Claris Works and Microsoft Word. £350. Also Mac Powerbook 165 with new battery – £150. Contact Graham or Penny on 472594.

WEB STUDENT WRITING FORUM: Wed 1 December, 12.30pm-2.00pm. Sandwiches available. Room C219.

CRITICAL READING: How do we encourage students to read critically and with engagement? Doreen du Boulay will open a workshop/discussion. Contact Phyllis Creme (email p.creme@sussex.ac.uk) or Diane Sumner, Student Writing Project, Sussex House.

TO LET: Two-bed detached bungalow from January/February 2000. In v. good condition, fully furnished, central heating. Suitable for visiting faculty on short let (6-12 months). 15 min. drive to campus via bypass. For further details, email R.L.Dowsett@sussex.ac.uk, or tel. 8238 or 461744.

WANTED: Studio/one-bed flat for new member of staff, from January for six months. Contact j.holmwood@ed.ac.uk.

FOR SALE: Electric typewriter (Canon), Excellent working condition and instruction book etc. £15. Tel. Chris 502759 or ext. 8678.

PART-TIME WORK: Swedish-based internet company looking for catering students to work part time inputting recipes into a database. Good knowledge of catering, good English and computer literacy required, also ideally able to speak either French or German. Contact simon@e-licious.com or tel. Simon Dickens on +44 647 50373.

FOR SALE: Ski salopettes, age 10-12, £5. Braun coffee filter machine, ideal office use, £5. Email A.Drew@sussex.ac.uk or ext. 8022.

Bulletin

There will be a Christmas issue of the Bulletin next Friday, 10 December.

The first Bulletin of the spring term will be out on Friday 14 January. The copy deadline for that issue will be 1.00pm on Friday 7 January.

Please contact the Information Office in Sussex House on ext. 8209 or email Bulletin@sussex.ac.uk.
The Transparency Review

Universities have traditionally disregarded the notion that their activities should be analysed by the usual accounting practices which calculate the cost of each activity and use that information to arrive at a price for them. This approach has not been seen as appropriate in the higher education world, although some sponsors have tried to impose such a system in order to ensure that their grants are correctly charged. A report produced in the summer, however, may change how we look at this.

In the Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in 1998, an extra £1.1 billion was given to the Science Budget to help promote science and innovation. There was, though, a condition attached. The Treasury required that, in future, HE institutions should be capable of demonstrating the full costs of research and other publicly funded activities in order to improve public accountability. As a response to this, the Funding Councils, the CVCP and the Office of Science and Technology jointly commissioned a review to advise on how a system of accounting could be introduced, across the whole sector, to provide information on the costs of HEIs’ activities and be ready for the next CSR. This review was called The Transparency Review of Research.

The report was completed earlier this year and has been approved by the relevant bodies. It is now being implemented by all UK universities.

The report requires each university to report on its costs analysed over five headings:

- Research – publicly funded
- Research – non-publicly funded
- Teaching – publicly funded
- Teaching – non-publicly funded
- Other

The information has to be produced according to a set of standards and the results have to be signed-off by the VC. The process also has to be audited.

Some of this information is available from current systems or can be produced with a little effort. However, the main element of our costs is academic time and Sussex, like most other universities, does not have a method of assessing the time spent on teaching and that spent on research. Obtaining this information, however, is a requirement of the report. A number of approaches are suggested. The minimum requirement to satisfy the audit criterion is a retrospective assessment by ‘Heads of Department’ followed by a diary exercise for representative groups (e.g. laboratory-based subjects, non-laboratory subjects). The diary exercise would need to be scheduled so that over a period of, say, five years all academic faculty would have been covered.

Three groups of universities have been identified and the timetable for response is different for each group. Sussex is in the second group of the top 23 research active universities (the first group is a pilot group of eight universities). We are required to design and pilot a scheme in the current year, test it on last year’s data and then use the revised system to report on 1999/2000 data in Summer 2001. The VC has set up a small
steering group to look after implementation at Sussex. Initially this comprises the SPVC, the Arts Budget Holder, Planning Officer and the Deputy Finance Director. This group is likely to be expanded as the process evolves. The Group has begun to look at the issues and will over the next few weeks involve Subject Chairs and Deans in discussion about how information may be gathered on academic time, the most important and sensitive part of the process. An outline strategy paper has been produced and will go to Planning, Senate and Council this term. Guidance on methodology is being produced by the national body co-ordinating the Transparency Review and we hope to learn from the experience of other institutions, particularly the pilot sites.

Some of the benefits we expect to gain from this process are

- a clearer picture of the true costs of research;
- underpinning arguments about under-funding of research;
- strengthening our negotiating position with commercial sponsors.

The Steering Group will attempt to minimise the inconvenience this process may cause and will wherever possible use existing information and learn from the experience of others.

Further information can be obtained from John Sanders, Deputy Finance Director. The web site www.bris.ac.uk/jcpg also contains useful information.

Tony McCaffery
Senior Pro-Vice Chancellor