

Christians in Science Durham 10th March 2007

Openness and democracy – the management of risk

Recent years have seen an escalation in the obsession with Health and Safety. Indeed 'Health and Safety' is blamed for all kinds of ills and is frequently epitomised as the essence of excessive bureaucracy, red tape and the nanny state. Many shelter behind the concept, to justify trivial and unnecessary rules; much of this is driven by an increasing litigation culture and the excessive caution engendered by large insurance premiums. The driving force for others is the need to justify their jobs or even retain them.

Governments in their desire to be open have opened a Pandora's box of expectations by the public, driven by the hyperbole of the tabloid press, for zero risk in all things. Thus calls are made for foodstuffs which have been shown to be carcinogenic when fed in enormous quantities to small animals, to be banned. Evidence shows that blue asbestos is potential highly carcinogenic, due to the size of the fibres whereas brown and white asbestos is significantly less hazardous; however the very word 'asbestos' conjures up a dangerous substance in the minds of the public. Public authorities were partly to blame by overreacting to the presence of asbestos in local authority owned dwellings. As a result the official categorisation of risk associated with the removal of asbestos assumes equal risk to health caused by all types.

We have become a risk averse society which has little understanding of the management of risk. Excessive risk aversion diverts unnecessary attention to trivial risks rather than real ones and has been described as the equivalent of a hoax 999 call. Risk has been defined as the combination of the probability of an event and its consequences and the chance of something happening that will have an impact on objectives. It is measured terms of consequences and likelihood.

The role of science and the advice of the scientific community on levels of risk are often not afforded the status they deserves by politicians concerned more with placating an anxious populace. The credibility of scientific advice, in the mind of the public, was seriously adversely affected by the abrupt change in scientific advice given to the then Conservative government in 1996 regarding the possibility of transmission of bovine spongiform encephalitis from animals to man.

Politicians have become discernibly more cautious in acting on scientific evidence that demonstrates low levels of risk. The 'precautionary principle' has become a safe harbour for those seeking from shelter from icy blasts from the tabloid press or from a vociferous electorate in marginal seats, notwithstanding the impossibility of proving total absence of risk.

The management and control of risk is brought into sharp focus at local level where Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) work for local authorities. EHPs are involved in dealing with risk in a wide range of fields and activities including food safety, the control of infectious disease, environmental protection, health and safety at work, housing conditions, pest control and many others. Working with, and for, locally elected politicians and for a public that has immediate and close access to the control of local affairs, brings with it unique challenges. Elected Members have been known to require acquiescence from staff to policies and programmes that are not

necessarily justified by available (scientific) evidence; this can exacerbated if a Councillor is a member of pressure group seeking to influence the (technical) policy of a local authority.

This can cause dilemmas for Christian staff who may be expected to less than totally honest in such situations. It may be possible to tell the truth but not the whole truth; however Jesus exhorts us to:

“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’, and your ‘No’, ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” Matt 5.37

Senior staff in local government genuinely risk losing their jobs if they fall out of favour with elected politicians.

Whilst some activity in government has been, and necessarily needs to continue to be, conducted in secret, pressures for openness are growing (the Freedom of Information Act being a prime example) and this, combined with the pervasive influence of the democratic process, has often resulted in the mismanagement of risk.

Greater risk perception by citizens can be due to uncertainty generated by a lack of openness in a regulatory process. The Food Standards Agency was established in 2000 with a remit to protect public health and restore public confidence in the way decisions are made. Its core values are to put consumer first, to be open and accessible and to be an independent voice. There is an expressed policy to be open about uncertainty at the same time as recognising best scientific advice and encouraging participation from all stakeholders.

This presentation will examine the concept of risk, its various definitions and characteristics of effective risk management. The influence of elected politicians, pressure groups, the media and risk aversion generally will be analysed.

Examples from the world of Environmental Health will serve to illustrate risk assessment and management in specific fields namely microbiological risk assessment, contaminated land remediation and health and safety hazards in housing.

The government, through the Better Regulation Unit of the Cabinet Office, is currently engaged in a nationwide exercise to align hazard analysis and risk assessment principles with the concept of regulatory enforcement by local authorities; this will be described and examined.

Andrew Griffiths DMS MCIEH LTCL
Chartered Environmental Health Practitioner

Director of Policy
Chartered Institute of Environmental Health
Chadwick Court
15 Hatfields
London SE1 8DJ

a.griffiths@cieh.org