

# Taking a Risk

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A neighbour swears blind that he caught food poisoning from a favourite local restaurant: do you ever book a table there again? A close relative suffers a heart attack, despite being a health food fanatic: do you shelve those intentions to go on a diet? Bird 'flu hits the news: do you throw out the chicken breasts you bought yesterday?

When making choices like these, first-hand experience and scary headlines are as much a part of the mix as any dispassionate assessment of the risks. For an impartial, evidence-based organisation like the Food Standards Agency, that means we have to look constantly for more persuasive ways to convey what we know and learn about food risks.

Our starting point is to distinguish clearly between the twin tracks of weighing up the risk, and working out what, if anything, should be done about it – the “what” and “how” of effective public protection. The recent switch to a BSE testing regime is a good example. An independent risk analysis justified allowing older cattle back into the food chain, subject to a negative test. But it was only right to do so having earned public trust and acceptance through open engagement and honesty about what we knew – and what we didn't know – about the risks.

This example is typical of the sort of issue that faces the Agency and earlier this month, in open session, the FSA board discussed three measures to ensure our risk assessments continue to be made using the best available scientific evidence and impartial expert judgement.

First, a new Science Strategy for the next five years was considered. Following consultation with leading scientists from across the country, the Strategy re-emphasises the

importance of gathering and using existing authoritative evidence, and focuses our own research resources on filling in where there are gaps or uncertainties.

Second, an enhanced role for our Chief Scientist was discussed, emphasising responsibility for “quality assurance” in the way the Agency gathers and uses scientific evidence.

Finally, the role of our nine Scientific Advisory Committees was reviewed. In common with other public protection bodies, we rely on a framework of expert committees for independent scientific advice. To make better use of this expertise, we discussed ways to improve the dialogue between the committees and the Agency's board – without compromising the scientists' integrity in risk analysis or the board's responsibility to make risk management decisions.

A public meeting last October provided a taster for the way forward when Professor Alan Jackson joined Board Members around the table. Professor Jackson chairs the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) and Board Members grilled him on his committee's endorsement of a “nutrient profiling” model developed by the Agency – a system for scoring foods according to their composition intended to help Ofcom regulate television advertising of food to children. It was an opportunity to give a public airing to differences of opinion on aspects of nutrient profiling – a tool used widely within the food industry – and to arrive at a final policy decision that is based, transparently, on the judgement of the leading experts.

Work is also under way to develop the Agency's understanding of the appetite for risk across a hugely diverse population – to help us



draw the line in the right place, to paraphrase Lord Phillips. Better regulation will follow from a better understanding of the personal cost-benefit analyses that people make when deciding on their own individual trade-offs between safety, convenience, cost and enjoyment.

Physical, chemical and life sciences may define what a risk is, but social, economic and behavioural sciences help determine how you deal with it.

Back in October, the FSA and the Royal Society brought senior social scientists together with scientific experts from our advisory committees to discuss how to accommodate social, cultural and environmental factors into risk assessment.

For some risks, like BSE or food poisoning, legislative powers will remain a necessary option. But for others, such as poor diet, powers of persuasion are likely to be more effective. Whenever possible we rely on giving people the information that allows them to make up their own minds. For example, by raising awareness of the risks of eating too much salt, or by providing clear, simple dietary information on the front of packs of processed foods to help with decisions about what to eat more or less of.

For the Agency, this means further advances in openness, transparency, and clarity of language if we are to help people make safer, healthier choices based on the risks rather than on random misfortune. The more people understand food risks, the more chance they will enjoy what they choose to eat and worry about it less.