

**RISK PERCEPTION: SCIENCE, PUBLIC DEBATE AND
POLICY MAKING**

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SPEECH

European Commissioner for Health and Consumer
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should first like to commend the Conference
organisers for the excellent content of this event. In recent
years, we have become used to the methodical application
of science to risk analysis. We are increasingly able to
assess and manage risk. However, we are still far from

satisfied, even in spite of our strenuous efforts to ensure transparency and widespread awareness of problems and the solutions we seek for them. On one hand, we should appreciate that steps have been taken in the right direction and that we are undoubtedly in a better position now than we were less than a decade ago. But, on the other, we should acknowledge that, insofar as we have failed, such failure may be due to our not properly understanding the way consumers perceive risk.

That is why I believe that conferences like today's may and should help to address the challenge that we all now face, and to answer the question that underlies the perception of risk. The question is, why has the future come to be perceived particularly in terms of risk, instead of in terms of progress?

In the developed world the taking of risk is not only an intrinsic condition of life but also essential to economic and social development. Living involves risk. To keep up our high quality of life we need a better grasp of the risks with which we live. The key is to know what level of risk we can accept. The viability of society may be compromised both

by taking on too high a level and too low. Today's decisions are thus vital to the future in the medium- and long-term.

The World Health Organization, in its Constitution, proclaims that health is a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being. This is the hinge of the delicate balance that must be struck in making decisions about health, a field in which food safety is deeply involved, so that we may attain our objectives without irreparable harm to the economy, which in turn could lead to stagnation in the development of society.

There is no zero-level of risk, however much some of us may attempt to achieve it, even through legislation. Therefore, we must measure and compare risks and adopt the most suitable measures to reduce them. It may sometimes even be best not to take any measures at all; the question is how does one find the formula to know. Indubitably, a systematic approach to problems helps to rationalise them, and protocols of action lead to fewer errors being made. These approaches will not wholly prevent misjudgement, but will nonetheless serve as a valuable tool

in specifying where and why an error has arisen, and thus to correct it.

In the current context of globalisation and the worldwide impact of issues, irrespective of any political or economic connotations it seems sensible to adopt a common 'code' to express risk, a code all of us can understand and accept. Such a code should be valid for any type of risk (to health, to the environment, to security, to property, etc.), and cover both discrete risks and the accumulation and/or cross-reinforcement of several risk factors. And when I say 'all of us', I mean it in the broadest sense: from the individual citizen to the public authorities ultimately responsible for decision-making. This common code is what risk analysis provides us with, and such has been our understanding in the European Union. We have accepted the notion and endeavoured to put it into practice in the development of our European and national organisations – each with its own special features and differences, but resting on a common conceptual base.

As the Philip's Report has pointed out, governments have for many years used techniques such a risk

assessment, cost-benefit analysis, and sensitivity analysis as a basis and justification for their decisions. These techniques have been developed and refined in the light of experience, a process which continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Risk assessment, the term most often used in the BSE documents, is one part a joint FAO/WHO definition of risk analysis, which comprises:

- 1) Risk assessment: a) hazard identification; b) hazard characterisation; c) exposure assessment; and d) risk characterisation;
- 2) Risk management: a) risk evaluation; b) option assessment; c) implementation of management decisions; and d) monitoring and evaluation; and
- 3) Risk communication: an interactive exchange of views with those involved or affected covering the whole process.

We have seen clearly that risk communication is essential, because it is a right recognised in our constitutions, because it helps in the implementation of

measures and because it greatly reduces the expense of direct intervention. Therefore, what is hindering communication with our consumers, who, after all, are the reason for, and the driving force of, all our efforts?

While we should be keenly aware – and I do not wish to seem overly repetitive with this – of the role that food safety scares have played in ‘amplifying risk’, we cannot bemoan these events indefinitely. Rather, we must make use of the experience of those times of difficulty to try to prevent them from coming about in future.

Lord Philips of Worth Matravers describes in the BSE Inquiry Report that risk perception is shaped by psychological and cultural factors, and may vary among different groups in society. Scientists tend to compare and rank different risks according to probabilities. The ‘lay’ public view may be more subjective, taking account of the novelty of the risks, the extent to which exposure to these risks is within their control, and whether the hazards are man-made or ‘natural’. These varying views have to be reconciled, and risk communication is an important part of the process.

Risk is a probabilistic concept that we have created to deal with complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty in the scientific and technical field. It is not always easy to understand. For a large majority of citizens, what we call 'risk' is often perceived as 'danger'. Given that reality, it is not enough to make matters transparent because, without our intending to, this may work against us. Our management measures are designed for people whom we think of as 'average consumers', and we assume that they are adequately informed and responsible. But is that the reality? We certainly have been unstinting in our efforts in this regard, and have at least attained some measure of cooperation with the consumer associations working with us on the decision-making process. This helps to reduce inertia and clear the way to action.

But we still have not properly addressed the issue of the citizen as an individual, in a personal and distinctive setting. Individuals expect those in whom they have placed their trust to exercise their responsibility as diligently and effectively as possible; but, to be frank, individuals rarely wish to become involved in a field which they regard as

vastly complex and, when they do become involved, perceive in a distorted and magnified way. How, then, should we communicate with the individual citizen? How can we ensure that our messages, which we are willing to provide with absolute honesty and transparency, have the desired effect, which is to secure the cooperation of our consumers? If we fail to achieve this goal, we shall be set to waste our efforts on risks the real magnitude of which is infinitely smaller than their perceived importance, and thus lose momentum in our struggle against real problems. It is a matter of 'getting into the citizen's shoes' and understanding what elements influence their perception of risk.

I think we should put communication into context, and avoid standardised, concept-laden mechanisms that have little to do with our surrounding reality.

In 1987, Slovic described 47 factors which he chose to call 'pro-scandal' factors. Among them are: the understanding of the public; whether or not scientists understand the risk, and whether they are able clearly to explain it; media coverage of the issue; whether the risk can be contained or, for example, there is some guilty party that

can be blamed. This is certainly a very interesting viewpoint and may help us in our work, but what will be of most help is to be aware of the context and the reality in which we operate. That reality will not be the same today as it was yesterday, nor will it remain the same tomorrow.

And central to that reality are the media, on which the solution hinges to a considerable extent. Without the cooperation and co-responsibility of the media, it will be very difficult for us to meet our goals. Their capacity to amplify or mitigate problems or, more precisely, the way in which problems are perceived by the public, can no longer be ignored or left to one side. I would like to point out one example from the Philips Report: in the case of BSE, there were two main dialogues, between the MAFF administrators and the veterinarians, doctors and other scientists who advised them; and between the Government and the public. The media (the press, radio and television) played an important role, as they were the main means of communication with the public.

We should try to find a common code of conduct so that the media may become the ideal channel for our

messages. We need to overcome mutual suspicion and create closer ties to achieve our common goal. The truly difficult achievement is for both parties to believe that that common goal exists, and thus to abandon our constant state of wariness: ours through fear of the use that will be made of the information, theirs through a belief that we always have something to hide in our communications.

In Spain, the Spanish Food Safety Agency – AESA – was created in 2001. With this move, the Spanish Government aims to make scientific knowledge the anchor for decisions affecting food safety. And our view is that the three components of risk assessment should be closely linked; scientific assessment cannot overlook social, economic and ethical aspects, and should provide those in charge of managing the issues with carefully considered options. Moreover, scientific assessment should take account of the needs of communication.

Furthermore, I should like to highlight a new factor that has helped to change the situation in significant ways. Through development of the White Paper on Food Safety,

guidelines have been laid down for how relations between food producers and consumers may be managed in future.

The White Paper establishes a key starting-point for decision-making in fields relating to food safety: scientific risk analysis. I am persuaded that this is the right way ahead: to base decisions on scientific opinion, and apply a principle of caution where required. In Spain, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is implementing a far-reaching plan for traceability of agricultural and livestock products, so as to manage agricultural sectors in such a way as to create synergies among produce monitoring programmes and the application of food safety principles. I think it is both feasible and beneficial to abide by one of the central ideas of the White Paper on Food Safety - integrated control from the farm to the table -, establishing a comprehensive mechanism to control production, conceived of as a system that monitors farm location, hygiene in production, control of livestock feed, use of phytosanitary and zoosanitary products, farm conditions – including standards of well-being – other means of productions and the use of GMO

One cannot persuade citizens overnight that the available information is useful chiefly for the exercise of their own right to participation, nor can we tell them how to interpret it. In the meantime, our progress should be gradual and steady. Any mistake may delay and hamper our efforts. We cannot achieve our goals without having first understood and taken on board all the connotations that influence the way in which our citizens perceive risk. Our ultimate aim is not communication in itself; rather, communication is a means to an end. It is not wordplay nor an end in itself, but a tool.

This is the view that we have taken in Spain, we have started a systematic process of exchange of views with the media and consumers. The aim is to share our experiences of how previous problems have been dealt with and see what we can do to improve in future. Once this process is firmly on course, it will create a climate of mutual understanding that will aid the purposes of communication.

Our meeting here today would seem to be a sign that all of us have problems in the process of communicating with our citizens. Certainly, if there is something we can be

sure of, it is that we shall learn from the experiences of others, from both their achievements and their mistakes. That is why I should like once again to thank the Commission for organising this Conference, from which, I am sure, we shall all benefit.

Thank you very much.