THE SCIENTIFIC STEERING COMMITTEE (SSC): A SHORT HISTORY OF SIX BUSY YEARS

In the mid-1990s Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) rapidly evolved into an issue of major public concern for which no readymade solutions were available. It was quite a difficult challenge to manage risk on a day-to-day basis in an area that is still composed of many unknowns. The uncertainties about the cause of the disease, its transmission and epidemiology and the absence of any diagnostic test or cure justified the decision to approach this risk with the highest precaution, to avoid that the disease might possibly evolve into a pan-European and possibly a pandemic threat. But at the same time, the precautions taken by the risk manager needed to be as proportional as possible to the real threat, avoiding unnecessary major societal and economic disturbances whenever possible. Matching risk assessment and risk management in the field of BSE was thus quite a challenge. The existing scientific advisory system at that time was, according to the European Parliament, not fully appropriate to deal with this challenge. It was in this context that a new advisory system, with the Scientific Steering Committee (SSC) and 8 sectorial Scientific Committees, was established in 1997.

The members of these Committees were selected following an international call for expression of interest. In total more than 1500 experts, also from non-EU countries, applied. From those, the most eminent scientists were chosen on the basis of their scientific excellence and experience. The members of a Scientific Committee do not receive a salary and have to declare in writing possible interests that may prejudice their independence.

Three key principles led the Commission to reform its scientific advisory system in 1997: it should be independent, transparent, and the advice itself should be scientifically excellent. These have not been hollow words. The *excellence* and *independence* of the scientific advice of the SSC and the 8 sectorial committees are widely accepted, far beyond the Commission services. International organisations such as WHO, OIE and EMEA almost routinely refer to them, international scientific bodies such as ILSI (International Life Sciences Institute) regularly quote them and national administrations use them to complement their own risk assessment *argumentaires*. The *transparency* of the system has almost become a “trademark” of the Commission and is one of the essential successes of the scientific committees, since respecting the principles of transparency throughout the process is not always an obvious choice. The opinions were also made public in quasi real time and could be challenged by the public. In several

cases scientific opinions have been amended in the light of external comments, contributions or criticisms. There is no need to argue that these assets should be nurtured in the future.

The mandate of the SSC was made much broader than BSE, as a multidisciplinary complement to the 8 sectorial committees (on Food, Animal Nutrition, Veterinary Measures related to Public Health, Animal Health and Animal Welfare, Plants, Cosmetic and Non-Food Products, Medicinal Products and Medicinal Devices, Toxicity, Ecotoxicity and the Environment). To assure the scientific soundness of BSE-related risk assessments, the TSE/BSE *ad hoc* Group was established, providing the SSC with direct access to the leading experts in this field. The SSC's mandate also included other areas such as monitoring emerging issues, fostering coherence between all of the Commission's nine scientific committees and introducing a holistic view on health and consumer protection matters, ensuring that food, feed and non-food issues are taken into account in a balanced way.

Since 1997 the SSC and its TSE/BSE *ad hoc* Group have been called upon continuously by the European Commission to provide the risk assessments that have been the sound scientific base for the Commission's risk management in relation to BSE and other TSEs. As a result, almost 75% of the SSC's resources and time was dedicated to BSE issues and only 25% could be invested in other important issues such as anti-microbial resistance, genetically modified plants and harmonisation of risk assessment approaches within and beyond the Commission services. The SSC prepared 279 scientific opinions and reports with the help of more than 200 scientists from some 25 countries and from a very wide scope of disciplines. To integrate such a broad scope of inputs, a step-by-step approach was systematically used. It started with a fundamental assessment of the available scientific know-how and of the risk that the SSC was asked to look at. This first step was always carried out by high level scientists, providing their input to ad-hoc working groups that were specifically established to bring together the best possible expertise for specific questions. In a second step the TSE/BSE *ad hoc* group (for TSE matters) or a specific task force (for the other fields) evaluated the output of the working group against their own expertise, already integrating it into a broader context. In a last step the SSC then integrated the outcome of these two levels into a wide multidisciplinary view that puts health and consumer protection issues in an appropriate and balanced public health context.

In the field of BSE, the reports and opinions of the SSC and its TSE/BSE *ad hoc* Group form a unique *argumentaire.* This has permitted the Commission to introduce

more than 32 legislative proposals, to take timely and appropriate measures on matters relating to public health, to take a position on matters of general concern and to successfully defend cases before the European Court of Justice. In 1999, for example, France challenged the authorisation of export of UK meat, even though the conditions under which this was permitted were very severe and restrictive and in line with advice from the SSC.

In the field of antimicrobial resistance, the SSC adopted a framework opinion in 1999 that provided the scientific basis for the European Union's policy aiming at minimising the threats to humans, animals and the environment from inappropriate uses of antimicrobials as much as possible. In the field of genetically modified plants (GMPs), the SSC accompanied a multidisciplinary exercise that yielded innovative guidance notes for the submission and evaluation of proposals for the introduction of GMPs.

Regarding the risk assessment approaches, the SSC has always considered not only that risk assessments should be of the highest quality but also that they should be harmonised as far as possible across scientific disciplines and areas of application (e.g., food, feed and non-food risks). The progressive harmonisation of human health and environmental protection risk assessment procedures within the EU and at international level is both of practical importance and scientifically justified. In this context the SSC has established an exercise on the Harmonisation of Risk Assessment Procedures in order to promote an active debate on current practices for risk assessment used by the scientific advisory bodies within the EU and at international level. The reports elaborated by a Task Force and adopted by the SSC have established a reference framework for harmonised procedures of risk assessment, especially in the fields of structuring the risk assessment process and the format of its outcomes, of microbiological and environmental risks and on the inclusion of new quality of life concerns in risk assessment.

In January 2002 the European Union established the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). The management of the current scientific advisory system is embedded in the Commission Services, whereas EFSA is an autonomous authority that will deal with a much broader range of "stakeholders". These are not only the Commission Services, but also the European Parliament, Member States, Consumer Associations, Industrial Associations, etc. EFSA will be the authority responsible for scientific advise and risk assessments in the fields of food additives, flavourings, processing aids and materials in contact with food; additives and products or substances in animal feed; plant heath, plant protection products and their residues; genetically modified organisms; dietetic products, nutrition and allergies; biological hazards

(including TSEs); contaminants in the food chain; animal health and welfare; multidisciplinary issues covering several of these fields. EFSA will become operational in the coming months, and the tasks of the Scientific Steering Committee and of the 5 Scientific Committees involved in food, feed, animal- and plant related matters, will move on to EFSA.

It is against the above history that the Scientific Steering Committee held its last meeting on 10-11 April 2003. The Commission is well aware that the work of the experts that served on the Scientific Steering Committee, the 8 sectorial committees, the TSE/BSE *ad-hoc* group as well as the many experts who were called upon without any salary, represented an additional workload to their normal professional duties and responsibilities, regularly carried out in their spare time. It is thanks to their ability to deliver their inputs, their integrity, their willingness to always reach consensus even in cases where scientific knowledge did not allow clear answers, that the huge number of opinions and risk assessments has been delivered, often against tight time constraints. The Commission is most grateful for this and realises the benefits of this work for the European consumer.