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**Inaugural joint meeting of the members of the non-food scientific
committees**

Wednesday 8 September

First meetings of the non-food scientific committees

Presentation by Commissioner Byrne

Brussels, Wednesday 8 September at 09:00

Welcome

First of all I have to apologise for not being able to welcome you yesterday at your first meeting, but I had to attend a meeting of the informal Agricultural Council in Nordwijk, the Netherlands.

I know that you were warmly welcomed by Robert Madelin who took the opportunity to explain the importance of your advisory role from his point of view. I am therefore going to focus on a small number of aspects of your work that are important for a Commissioner who is often in the firing line on matters of risks to the consumer.

You will be aware that I am approaching the end of my 5 year period as Commissioner for Consumer Protection and Public Health. This has been an extraordinary experience in many ways, bringing me into contact with many issues where scientifically based risk assessment has been pivotal to the political decision making process on many sensitive issues.

In fact, I had to depend on scientific advice from my very first days as Commissioner, when BSE was still causing major

difficulties for the Community. I cannot overstate the importance of scientific advice in the institutional decision making process, an importance that is continuing to grow, and therefore, the importance of your work in the scientific committees.

It is however, not simply a matter of sound science. To be effective within the Community, where there are frequently opposing views, powerful commercial interests, social and political pressures, it is essential that the advice is trusted. Otherwise, the opposing parties will continue to selectively use scientific arguments that support their case thereby confusing the search for a balanced solution.

This brings me directly to the importance of ensuring that our external stakeholders, whether consumers or industries, can trust the advice of the Committees to be impartial and free from external influences. After all, scientific advice, no matter how good, is only of value if it is accepted by those who have to live with its consequences.

The principle that effective scientific advice must not only be independent, but must also be seen to be independent, is bedrock. It was at the heart of the Commission's proposal to set up the European Food Safety Authority to provide advice on

risks related to the food chain. It is also an explicit element of the recent Decision setting up your Committees.

I am pleased to be able to say that my period in the Commission has seen the completion of a major overhaul of Community procedures for providing independent scientific advice in the food and non-food areas.

Diverging opinions and EFSA cooperation,

This brings me to the importance that we have attached to establishing effective working contacts with other Community bodies where overlaps may occur. The European Food Safety Authority, or EFSA, is of particular importance here given the high potential for use of similar industrial substances in food and non-food products and the overlaps arising from many widely spread, environmental contaminants.

This raises the problems which can arise if Community bodies give diverging views on related risks. It is satisfying to note that your new committees, EFSA and the European Medicines Evaluation Agency (EMA) all operate under similar provisions requiring cooperation to prevent or, failing that, to reconcile divergences in their scientific opinions.

Independence

Of course, no-one can claim to be perfectly independent and many of you will have potential conflicts of interest arising from your normal professional relationships. The important point is openness and to ensure that such conflicts of interests are openly declared both within the Committees and to the outside world. From my perspective, if I am informed that a member has a potential conflict of interest in relation to some sensitive public health issue, it is far nicer to be able to say, yes, we are fully aware, than to act surprised! Full declarations of interest therefore provide you with a mechanism to demonstrate your independence.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of convincing a sceptical public of reliability of scientific advice. One only has to think of the controversies surrounding the safety of GM products, but my experience over the past 5 years allows me to suggest some good practices which I believe would greatly assist the work of my successor.

Responsibilities of members

I mentioned earlier that as Commissioner for Consumer Protection and Public Health I am frequently in the firing line.

Although you will not be called to defend Commission policy, and should not even if you are invited to, you need to be aware that your names are in the public domain. You will be asked to give the Commission your advice on matters where there are often powerful commercial and social pressures and you may be the subject of direct or indirect lobbying. If you find yourself asked to comment on matters which arise because of your membership, it is important that you also take account of the need to protect the integrity of your scientific committee. I therefore stress the importance of the rules of procedure which have been extensively revised to cover matters relating to independence, transparency and relationships with stakeholders.

The need for clarity

Apart from the fundamental issue of independence, it is very important to express opinions, especially on complex issues, in a language that is accessible to the lay-reader. As a lawyer, it has not always been easy to grasp the more subtle scientific arguments or to interpret phrases which are designed to give conclusions without compromising scientific accuracy. But I am lucky. I have a team of competent colleagues who come to my rescue, although, even they have occasionally struggled to draw a unique conclusion from the advice.

If we sometimes have difficulty, spare a thought for the man and woman in the street who also want, and deserve to understand the nature of risks to themselves and to their children whether they arise from the use of their mobile phones, sun-beds or these strange new nano-particles that they keep reading about.

Of course, I also understand that just like we lawyers, scientists have their specialised language with its well defined vocabulary and need to be rigorous in their statements. I also know that the Committees have worked hard to express themselves clearly in the past and that the difficult cases are the minority.

I would however like to leave you with my personal plea that, especially for opinions on sensitive issues, you give particular weight to the need for clarity and to the avoidance of ambiguity. If science does not know the answer today or if, as often, there are uncertainties, this should be, simply, made clear.

Concluding remarks

I know you have a busy morning session ahead of you where you will elect your chairs and vice chairs for the next three years and organise your work programmes. I will therefore

close by echoing the sentiments of Robert from yesterday. Firstly, I wish to thank you for accepting the responsibility of membership of the scientific committees and I give additional thanks to those of you who have served in the previous committees. Secondly, I very much hope that you find membership brings you professional satisfaction resulting from the knowledge that your hard work and expertise is an indispensable part of the Community's decision making process.