

COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL ASPECTS OF RADIATION IN THE ENVIRONMENT

128th COMARE MEETING, Thursday 11th March 2021

Online meeting

Present

Chair: Dr Chris Gibson

Members: Dr Jane Barrett
Professor Frank de Vocht
Professor John Harrison
Dr Mark Hill
Dr Ray Kemp
Dr Colin Martin
Professor Stewart Martin
Dr Richard McNally
Professor Graham Smith
Professor James Smith
Professor Malcolm Sperrin
Professor David Sutton
Professor Roger Taylor
Professor Mireille Toledano
Dr Chris Westcott

Assessors: BEIS
DHSC
EA
FSA
FSS
HSE
ONR
PHE
PHS
SEPA
SG
WG

Secretariat: Dr Simon Mann (PHE)
Dr Emma Petty (PHE)
Mrs Samantha Watson (PHE)

Open Session

1. Welcome & declarations

- 1.1 The Chair opened the 128th meeting and welcomed members to the third online meeting for the Committee, due to the COVID pandemic. It was noted that the agenda has been condensed to accommodate the change in format, and that the meeting is not being opened to observers to ensure meeting security. The meeting would still be split into an open and a closed session due to the minuting requirements of specific items. The Chair reminded members of the online meeting protocol.
- 1.2 The Chair welcomed the three new members to their first COMARE meeting - Professor James Smith, Professor Malcolm Sperrin and Dr Chris Westcott. The Chair also welcomed the new WG assessor and the replacement assessors for SG.
- 1.3 The Chair reminded members of the private nature of the Committee's proceedings and that papers marked "For Members Use Only" should be kept in members' own hands. Members were also reminded that they should disclose any relevant interests to the Chair either now or before the items concerned.
- 1.4 Apologies were received from the assessors for BEIS, DHSC, FSA, DforE, DoH NI, ONR, SG and WG. The Chair reminded assessors that substitutes may attend the meetings.

2. Minutes of the 127th COMARE meeting

i. Minutes, actions & matters arising

- 2.1 The Chair asked for comments or corrections to the minutes from the 127th meeting. The minutes were approved without amendment, and the open session minutes would be published on the COMARE webpage.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

- 2.2 The Chair reminded members of the invitation for a representative to join the Public and Community Oversight Group (PCOG) for the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Protection Research Unit (HPRU), discussed at the last meeting, and noted that Professor Stewart Martin had agreed to be the COMARE representative. Professor Martin reported that the PCOG met on the 26th November 2020 and the meeting in February 2021 had been cancelled. The PCOG is a large group with over 40 members from a mix of organisations. Most members, including the chair, are lay members. The group anticipates meeting twice a year. The November meeting included general talks from the HPRUs and the MRC Centre for Environment and Health. The HPRU for chemical and radiation threats and hazards was of particular interest.

- 2.3 The Chair informed members that there was no update available on the establishment of the new National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP), which will incorporate PHE. The current understanding is that the radiation part of PHE will transfer into the new institute en bloc, but no other details are available at this stage. Members will be updated as more information becomes available.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

- 2.4 The Chair reminded members that an action was placed on BEIS at the last meeting to provide details of the consultation on the draft policy on radioactive substances presented. The BEIS assessor reported that the consultation had been delayed until summer 2021, with intention to publish the policy framework in 2022. The COMARE secretariat will be informed when the consultation is opened.

[ACTION: BEIS]

3. Committee matters

i. Membership

- 3.1 The Chair informed members that having filled three of the six posts in the 2020 recruitment campaign, the remaining three vacancies will be included in the 2021 recruitment campaign. Dr Mann formally introduced Professor Smith, Professor Sperrin and Dr Westcott to the Committee. The Chair welcomed the three members to COMARE.
- 3.2 The Chair noted that his term of office completes on 31st October 2021, so the 129th meeting in July would be his last as Chair. Recruitment for a new Chair of COMARE will be included in the 2021 recruitment campaign and applications will be welcomed from existing members.
- 3.3 The Chair informed members that the annual 360° feedback exercise on the performance of the Chair and the handling of committee processes by the secretariat will soon be circulated to members. While provision of feedback is not obligatory, it is a useful way for DHSC to gather information on the running of the Committee and the Chair encouraged members to participate. Any feedback provided should returned to DHSC.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

[ACTION: Members]

ii. 2020 Annual Report & Work Programme 2021-2022

- 3.4 The Chair drew members' attention to COMARE's work programme for April 2021-March 2022, which has been discussed with DHSC. The programme includes the formation of the subcommittee to investigate the potential health impacts from an association between radiation exposure and cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease.
- 3.5 The Chair brought the 2020 annual report to members' attention and thanked Professor Kemp for assisting with the drafting of this document to make it more reader friendly. The Chair confirmed that both documents would be placed on the COMARE webpage following the meeting.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

iii. Correspondence and communications

- 3.6 The Chair informed members that no Freedom of Information (FOI) requests had been received since the last meeting. A 'Letter of Notice' has been received regarding EMF concerns, which was also sent to several other parties. The document follows on from previous letters of concern submitted to the Committee. It was not circulated to members as it did not meet the submission requirements for COMARE, but a copy would be provided to members on request.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

4. Working group reports

i. Contaminations Working Group (CWG)

- 4.1 The Chair informed members that the CWG met yesterday (10th March) via an online meeting. He brought the members' attention to the note on particle updates.
- 4.2 The EA assessor provided a background to the Sellafield beach monitoring programme, which commenced in 2007. An update was provided on the current monitoring programme. The EA assessor reported that while the pandemic had an impact on monitoring, the 2020 programme reached its target of 105 hectares. The finds were similar to previous years, although reductions in finds have been seen over the past decade. Monitoring for the 2021 programme started in February and is expected to be completed in full this year. An ecological risk assessment is still to be finalised and will be provided to the CWG on

completion. The EA assessor informed members that while find rates are currently well below action levels, a clear intervention plan is required if find rates increase significantly. EA is revising the notification intervention protocol for beach monitoring and an updated draft protocol was discussed by the CWG yesterday. The comments from the CWG will be taken into account in the revisions.

- 4.3 The EA assessor provided an update on the previously reported leak from a Magnox swarf storage silo at Sellafield. The leak is still under investigation by EA and improvement requirements are being added to Sellafield Ltd's environmental permit from 1st April 2021 to establish the cause of the leak and the establish the best available techniques to address the situation. There is no evidence from monitoring of the leak having reached the groundwater and any migration of radionuclides in the ground is not expected to reach the site boundary within the next decade. Members discussed the level of activity in the ground from the leak. Members were informed that the improvement requirements will require the formalisation of the existing work plan for managing the leak and this will be a legal requirement.
- 4.4 The Chair asked the SEPA assessor to give an update on the current situations at Dounreay and Dalgety Bay. The SEPA assessor provided a background to the monitoring at Dounreay, noting that radioactive contamination had been detected on coastal areas since the 1980s. The current programme has been running since 2002 in various formats. Monitoring has continued through the most recent lockdown, with a particle find from Sandside Bay in January 2021. A more complete update will be provided at the next COMARE meeting.
- 4.5 The SEPA assessor also provided a background on the contamination at Dalgety Bay. A voluntary remediation programme by the MoD is meant to start this year, but SEPA have not yet received an application for the works. The remediation window will close in October and resume in April 2022. SEPA have not been able to attend the site since March 2020 because of the pandemic, but signage etc. have been assessed and have been found adequate.
- 4.6 The Chair noted that the FSA has asked the CWG to review a risk assessment on the radiological risk to the public in the UK if import controls on imported food from Japan are removed. The request was discussed at the CWG meeting yesterday. It was proposed that the CWG would review the FSA risk assessment. The main Committee would sign off the response from the CWG prior to submission to FSA. It was suggested that one of the lay members could participate in the CWG review. Dr Westcott agreed to undertake this action.

[ACTION: CWG]

[ACTION: Secretariat]

[ACTION: Dr Westcott]

- 4.7 The Chair noted that yesterday was his last CWG meeting and he thanked Professor Harrison, who has agreed to take on the role of chair of the CWG.

ii. Authorisations Working Group (AWG)

- 4.8 Professor Sutton, the AWG Chair, informed members that no consultations have been considered since the last meeting.

5. Committee briefings and updates:

- 5.1 The Chair reminded members that the annual PHE update on radon had been postponed from the 127th meeting, to allow for an additional briefing by Professor Harrison.

i. Radon and public health

a. PHE annual update

- 5.2 The Chair asked the PHE assessor to present the annual update on radon and public health. Members were provided with an update on the following issues:

Recent programmes and publications

- Work with HSE
- Targeted radon campaigns and public information
- Professional training
- Shale gas
- European Atlas of Natural Radiation
- Journal article on radon passive monitor quality assurance

Forthcoming publications

5.3 The Chair thanked the PHE assessor for the update.

b. Radon brief

5.4 The Chair asked Professor Harrison to present his radon brief to the Committee. Professor Harrison advised members that the accompanying paper would be submitted to the Journal of Radiological Protection. The article comments on recommendations made by the ICRP on radon risk, and the recent UNSCEAR review. The main source of lung cancer risk estimates from radon is from studies of miners. Recent data shows a tendency for higher risk levels, which is consistent with studies of residential exposures. ICRP have issued new dose coefficients for radon, which take into account the epidemiological studies. UNSCEAR have undertaken a thorough review and support the ICRP conclusions of greater risk at lower levels of exposure. However, UNSCEAR have decided to continue to use the old lower dose coefficient level, to avoid changes from previous assessments. It was suggested that there could be confusion if two different dose coefficients are used internationally. The Inter-Agency Committee on Radiation Safety (IACRS) have indicated that the ICRP dose coefficients should be used but note that it is up to individual national authorities to decide if and when to implement the new ICRP dose coefficients for radon.

5.5 Members agreed with the concerns of having two dose coefficients in use and noted that as action levels are normally linked to ICRP risk factors, there may be an effect if the risk factor doubles. Members were informed that the UK already uses an action level less than the ICRP level. There was also discussion on risk to smokers compared with non-smokers and how this is factored into the risk models.

ii. UNSCEAR report

5.6 The Chair brought the UNSCEAR summary report to the attention of members, noting that it had been covered in part with Professor Harrison's presentation.

6. Information papers

6.1 The Chair drew attention to twelve information papers and three digital links and asked members for their comments on these papers. It was observed that one of the non-ionising radiation papers appeared to imply a correlation between energy and effect but that the magnitude of the effect was not clear. It was noted that there were a large number of non-ionising radiation papers that reported observational effects.

7. Any Other Business

7.1 No additional items were raised.

Closed Session

8. Studies in progress

- i. Thyroid cancer incidence study
- ii. SAHSU update

8.1 The minutes for these items were considered as reserved business as they concerned pre-publication material.

9. COMARE Subcommittee reports

- i. Cardio-/Cerebrovascular Effects

9.1 The minutes for these items were considered as reserved business as they concerned pre-publication material.

10. COMARE publications in progress

- i. Interventional Radiology issues

10.1 The minutes for these items were considered as reserved business as they concerned pre-publication material.

The next COMARE meeting will be held on Thursday 8th July 2021. The format of the meeting is still to be agreed. The Chair thanked members for attending and closed the meeting at 12.48 pm.

Abbreviations

AWG	Authorisations Working Group
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
CWG	Contaminations Working Group
DforE	Department for Education
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
DoH NI	Department of Health for Northern Ireland
EA	Environment Agency
EMF	electromagnetic field
FOI	Freedom of information
FSA	Food Standards Agency
FSS	Food Standards Scotland
HPRU	Health Protection Research Unit
HSE	Health & Safety Executive
IACRS	Inter-Agency Committee on Radiation Safety
ICRP	International Commission on Radiological Protection
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government
MoD	Ministry of Defence
NDA	Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
NIHP	National Institute for Health Protection
NIHR	National Institute for Health Research
ONR	Office for Nuclear Regulation
PCOG	Public and Community Oversight Group
PHE	Public Health England
PHS	Public Health Scotland
PQ	Parliamentary Question
SAHSU	Small Area Health Statistics Unit
SEPA	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
SG	Scottish Government
UNSCEAR	United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation
WG	Welsh Government