

COMARE – Annual Report 2020

2020 has been an unusual year that presented a number of challenges for the Committee, including coping with alternative meeting arrangements.

1. What we do / our role

The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment is an expert scientific advisory committee for the Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC) that provides independent advice to the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations on a wide range of public health issues associated with radioactivity and radiation. It meets three times a year and its working groups and specialist subcommittees do so more often to consider evidence and prepare materials to support the Committee. Much of the work is done outside the formal meetings. The main Committee hears, considers, questions and discusses reports from Public Health England (PHE), the Environment Agency (EA), the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) among others. The committee opens its meetings to observers and receives submissions from third parties.

2. Membership

At the close of 2019, there were 16 appointed expert members, one appointed lay member and three vacancies on the Committee. Dr Mark Hill joined the Committee in May, taking on the radiobiology post held by Professor Stephanie McKeown, who retired from COMARE having completed her term of office. Three further members also completed their terms of office during 2020 – Dr Paul Darragh, Professor Brenda Howard and Dr Tom Nunan.

An open recruitment round was undertaken in the later part of the year for six positions and appointments agreed on three of these, to commence in January 2021. The next recruitment round is planned during 2021.

At the close of 2020, the Committee comprised of 13 expert members, one lay member, three new members (from 2021) and three vacancies.

Expert members are drawn from a broad range of scientific and medical disciplines to support COMARE's technical work. Lay members have a specific role to represent the public interest aspects of the Committee's work and to advise accordingly. All members have equal status on the Committee.

3. COMARE Meetings

In 2020, the main Committee meetings were:

- 125th meeting – 10th March
- 126th meeting – 9th July
- 127th meeting – 12th November

The 125th meeting was attended by members in London, following the standard format. Both the 126th and 127th were impacted by the COVID pandemic and were held via an online platform. This required members to adapt to a new way of interacting and discussing items.

Subcommittees, working groups and working parties:

The Medical Practices Subcommittee on Interventional Radiology, MPS(IR), held two further meetings during 2020, while preparing a report. Both meetings were held using online platforms due to the impact of the COVID pandemic.

- 6th MPS(IR) Subcommittee meeting – 23rd April
- 7th MPS(IR) Subcommittee meeting – 2nd June

The standing Contaminations Working Group (CWG) completed its two annual meetings. The 15th meeting was held in London; however, the 16th meeting was conducted via an online platform.

- 15th Contaminations Working Group meeting – 9th March
- 16th Contaminations Working Group meeting – 11th November

4. Progress on 2019-2020 work programme

PUBLICATIONS:

COMARE published its 18th Report ([Medical radiation dose issues associated with dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry \(DXA\) scans for sports performance assessments and other non-medical practices](#)) in July 2019, COMARE did not publish any further reports during 2020, but continued to work on the forthcoming report on Interventional Radiology issues.

SUBCOMMITTEES:

Interventional Radiology Issues

COMARE was asked by DHSC to produce advice on issues concerning radiation doses from interventional radiology in the UK. Interventional radiology is a rapidly growing field that uses real-time X-ray imaging to guide a wide range of minimally invasive surgical and therapeutic treatments. The established MPS(IR) subcommittee held two meetings via an online platform in 2020 and completed its investigation by the end of the year. A draft report was produced for consideration by the main Committee. Once approved by COMARE, this advice will be submitted to DHSC, with the intention of it being published as COMARE's 19th Report in 2021.

Cardio-/cerebrovascular effects of ionising radiation

A project proposal was submitted to DHSC to clarify the purpose and approach to this work in December 2019. It was agreed that the work would progress following completion of the Report on Interventional Radiology issues. In 2020, a subcommittee of COMARE members was established for this project. It is anticipated that work will commence in early 2021.

WORKING GROUPS:

Contaminations

The Contaminations Working Group (CWG) met twice in 2019 and considered updates on the respective beach monitoring programmes submitted from Dounreay in Scotland and Sellafield in Cumbria, noting the radioactive particles detected at each site. The Working Group also followed the monitoring work and remediation programme being undertaken at Dalgety Bay in the Firth of Forth. Disruptions were noted in all these programmes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Working Group updated the main Committee on its discussions.

Authorisations

The Authorisations Working Group upholds COMARE's standing commitment to advise on discharges of radioactive materials as and when new or revised authorisations are produced. The Working Group advises on draft authorisations and responds to relevant consultations and keeps the main Committee aware of its proceedings. The Authorisations Working Group (AWG) continued to conduct its work online throughout the year. In 2020 the group responded to three consultations. The first of these was a consultation by SEPA on proposed changes to the Letter of Agreement covering the disposal of radioactive waste from HMNB Clyde, Coulport and Faslane. The second and third were Environment Agency consultations concerning permit applications for Sizewell B and Sizewell C respectively.

5. Requests for advice

COMARE received no formal requests for advice during 2020.

6. Additional items under consideration by the committee

- COMARE received its annual update from Public Health England (PHE) on electromagnetic fields (EMFs) on 12th November 2020. An additional brief on radon issues was proposed for the Committee; however, delays to relevant international reports resulted in this item being postponed to 2021. Public concerns on the health issues associated with EMFs continued to be brought to the Committee's attention throughout 2020. This is an area where strongly held opinions differ and there are active special interest groups. COMARE reviews relevant research publications on this topic, together with an annual report from PHE. The recruitment programme will continue to address the need for expertise on the Committee to support its work in this area.
- COMARE continued to work with the Small Area Health Statistics Unit (SAHSU), based in Imperial College, London on the surveillance of childhood cancer incidence in the vicinity of nuclear installations in Great Britain. Regular updates were provided to COMARE in 2020.

7. Correspondence

The Committee received and responded to correspondence regarding public concerns on the health issues associated with EMFs, especially those from 5G communications systems, and other issues of relevance to COMARE's work. In 2020 there were 34 such emails that required a response. These were primarily handled by the secretariat and reported to the Committee.

8. Representation

Professor Stewart Martin will be COMARE's representative on the Public and Community Oversight Group (PCOG) for the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Protection Research Unit (HPRU) in Chemical & Radiation Threats and Hazards. The first meeting of the group was held in November 2020.

9. Items of published information provided to members

In addition to the primary papers circulated for discussion at each meeting, COMARE members are provided with a selection of relevant peer-reviewed publications and digital links to reports from professional bodies and other scientific committees. In 2020, information papers and links were provided to Committee members for the following topics:

Ionising radiation	16 items
Non-ionising radiation (EMF)	17 items
Other (e.g. cancer causes)	1 item