

## From the Wings: The AVIS College Bulletin May 2007

### Risk Communications: Some Thoughts and Techniques

I had the pleasure of being invited to speak at the American Health Physics Society, Florida Chapter, Spring Meeting at Daytona Beach on April 19, 2007, and the topic was risk communications. This provoked a very lively, positive discussion and general agreement that risk communications is key to the regulatory approach of the future for radiation safety.

One of the most pressing challenges facing the modern veterinarian is risk communications, especially when it comes to public health and food safety. So I thought it might stimulate some discussion in the growing AVIS community to look at the same topic in this edition of **From the Wings**. At a minimum, communication is often the principal instrument for putting food safety policy into practice. Communication about risk flows directly from characterisation and assessment of risk. The requirement of modern practice, enshrined in law, to separate powers between those in charge of risk assessment and those with responsibility for risk management/ communication seems to me to introduce a fatal flaw into the overall mediation of risk in society, and breach the principle of commonality of interest between producer and consumer.

In a wider sense, we seem to regulate first, communicate second. In a stakeholder society, especially one that is avowedly consumer-driven, communication is sometimes a powerful *alternative* to regulation. It can defuse the emotions of minority pressure groups, and eliminate the need for excessive legislation

In 2001, a high-level British government working group came out with some useful insights<sup>1</sup>:

Communication is of fundamental importance in the regulation of risks. It allows people to participate in, or be effectively represented in, decisions about managing risks. And it plays a vital part in putting decisions into practice - whether helping people to understand regulations, informing them and advising them about risks they can control themselves, or dissuading them from antisocial and risky behaviour.

A recent study sponsored by the Interdepartmental Liaison Group on Risk Assessment (ILGRA) found many examples of good and improving practice in risk communication in Government Departments. But it also found that communication is sometimes seen simply as "provision of information", rather than a two-way process which engages people in discussion and debate. Furthermore, there are times when communication is "bolted on" rather than integrated into the decision making process.

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<sup>1</sup> Social Amplification of Risk: The Media and the Public, Health and Safety Executive, (2001)  
See also Risk Communication: A Guide to Regulatory Practice, Health and Safety Executive, (2002)

### Guide Principles

The approach advocated is distilled down into four guide principles for designing an effective approach to risk communications:

1. integrate risk communication and risk regulation
2. listen to stakeholders
3. tailor messages and
4. manage the process.

If these principles are used to embed a coherent, strategic approach to risk communications, then many of the best practices that flow from them can be in the best sense “designed in” to regulations, rather than bolted on to them after they are promulgated.

### A Seven Step, Systemic Model

Reflecting further on these principles, and on my own work in the risk communications and regulatory fields, I asked myself the question what the consequence might be of meeting guide principle 1, and integrating risk communication with risk regulation. It led me to a seven stage process model, as follows:

1. Characterization
2. Contextualization
3. Communication
4. Negotiation
5. Determination
6. COLLABORATION
7. Evaluation.

Considering these seven steps in slightly greater detail, I mapped the following eight components:

1. Characterization: use the “all hazards” (Biological, Chemical, Physical, Radiological) approach – deliberately decontextualised.

Then conduct the socialisation and mediation process, in the remaining steps:

2. Contextualization: *what is the setting?*
3. Communication: *who are the stakeholders?*
4. Negotiation: *what are the options?*
5. Determination: *what do we do?*
6. COLLABORATION: *do it together*
7. Evaluation: *did we live to tell the tale?*
8. Enhancement: *Did anybody learn from this and change anything?*

### Key Performance Indicators: A Score-card Approach

This approach in turn yields a possible “score-card” which AVIS members might wish to apply to issues they face in risk communications and regulations regarding consumer and stakeholder interests in animal health and food safety:

## Key Performance Indicators: The "score card" approach

1. Characterization: <i>"all hazards" (B,C,P,R)</i>	1. Hazards	
2. Contextualization: <i>what is the setting?</i>	2. Setting	
3. Communication: <i>who are the stakeholders?</i>	3. Stakeholders	
4. Negotiation: <i>what are the options?</i>	4. Options	
5. Determination: <i>what do we do?</i>	5. Action Plan	
6. COLLABORATION: <i>do it together</i>	6. Communications	
7. Evaluation: <i>did we live to tell the tale?</i>	7. Outcomes	
8. <i>Did anybody learn from this and change anything?</i>	8. Lessons Learned	

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In a future article, I will explore how to link the interoperability objective defined in the February 2007 From the Wings with the risk communications approach I sketch out here.

Professor Julian Hilton  
AVIS College Chairman.