TOX/2017/13

COMMITTEE ON TOXICITY OF CHEMICALS IN FOOD, CONSUMER PRODUCTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Reports of the COT-COC Synthesising Epidemiological Evidence Subgroup (SEES)

Introduction

1. The Committee discussed a proposal, to produce guidance on the COT's approach to assessing the quality of epidemiological research and synthesising the evidence that it generated, at the October meeting in 2014. There was no written documentation available that could potentially be made available on the website for public transparency. Also, development of guidance could provide a timely review on current practice and guidance for members and secretariat – it was noted that various bodies were working on similar initiatives. These included: a working group of the FSA's General Advisory Committee on Science (GACS), which was looking at the use of scientific evidence more generally. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was developing guidance on the balance of evidence. An expert workshop on "Implementing systematic review techniques in chemical risk assessments: challenges and opportunities" was to be held in November 2014 at the Royal Society of Chemistry. DEFRA's Hazardous Substances Advisory Committee had produced a document on evaluation of risks from chemicals. In addition, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, and the Committee on Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COC) were pursuing initiatives in this area.

2. At the COT meetings in October and December 2014, Members agreed that it would be useful to set out how the COT looks at evidence, in the light of guidance from other groups, since the COT process currently, although considered to be robust by the Committee, was not explicitly documented. This was also discussed by COC at its meeting in November 2014 and it was agreed that a COT Member would lead a small working group of experts, including epidemiologists from the COC, to undertake this task. Administrative support would be provided by the FSA Secretariat. The objective would be to produce an overview document explaining the approach of the COT and COC, which would also draw on what other groups were doing, including COMEAP. It was agreed that the guidance would focus on epidemiology to start with, and a decision would then be made on whether to extend it to include the assessment of toxicological evidence.

3. In February 2015 Dr Hansell introduced a paper on the proposed subgroup, to review approaches that the Committee takes to the synthesis of epidemiological evidence. It was agreed that the subgroup should reflect on whether the output from their work should be guidance for the Committee, or a communication to the public about the approaches currently employed by the Committee.

4. The subgroup met on four occasions (July and October 2015, October 2016 and February 2017). During this time the scope of review was refined and the approaches to epidemiological evidence used by the COT and COC were reviewed. Scoring systems and systematic reviews of epidemiological evidence were discussed in depth.

5. Two reports were produced by the subgroup. The “Report of the Synthesising Epidemiological Evidence Subgroup (SEES) of the Committee on Toxicity and Committee on Carcinogenicity” (Annex A), intended to form the basis of a guidance document and a “Report on SEES subgroup methods of working and recommendations” (Annex B).

6. This was an area of interest internationally, particularly the development of guidance on observational studies in relation to environmental hazards. The subgroup Chair led a workshop at the International Society of Environmental Epidemiology in September 2015, with speakers from Public Health England, a member of COMEAP and from the US Environmental Protection Agency, which resulted in a link in with the Cochrane group and was interested in the work of the sub-group.

Questions on which the views of the Committee are sought

7. Members are asked to consider the reports and provide any comments they may have. In particular:

Annex A - Report

i) Do Members consider that the Report of the Synthesising Epidemiological Evidence Subgroup (SEES) of the Committee on Toxicity and Committee on Carcinogenicity has met its aims and objective?

ii) Do Members consider that the current document provides sufficient information and guidance for members of the Committee and secretariat, or is further work needed?

iii) If changes are needed, what changes to format or additional information, if any, do Members consider should be included in a guidance document?

Annex B – Methods of working and recommendations

iv) Do Members have comments on the recommendations in this report? Which of these should be implemented? What review process should be put in place?

Secretariat
March 2017

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