

When health scares become our daily meal

Date: Tuesday 15 January 2008

Venue: RADISSON SAS EU HOTEL, Rue d'Idalie 35, Brussels

Timing: 12.15pm – 1.30pm

Featuring:

Nathalie Moll, Executive Director, Europabio

**Dr William Durodie, Senior Lecturer in Risk and Corporate Security,
Resilience Centre, Cranfield University**

Chair: Dr Tim Evans, Director of Development, Stockholm Network

Nathalie Moll:

We, as Europeans, spend an increasing amount of time worrying about what we eat. From a developing world perspective, I support the approach that it's "better to be fed than dead", so I recognise that there is a place for GMO food.

Whenever I meet politicians around Europe, for them it's always about public opinion - they don't seem to have a sense of global responsibility. We, as Europeans have a responsibility. Are we so naval-gazing not to realise that our policies in Europe have an effect on developing countries? Developing countries have a right to choose what technology fits their needs the most. They also have their own science and their own pride, and we have to recognise that.

The centre part of today's topic is food safety. When I go around speaking to groups and policy makers, I often ask if they're aware that GMO food is the only one that has been tested for food safety. I would feel safer feeding my children GMOs.

I accept that we, the industry, may not be communicating our message properly. I think we're too well-behaved; I always say that we're wearing velvet gloves while our opponents are wearing boxing gloves. We haven't been prepared to say: "Organic food has not been tested, therefore you don't know it's safe".

I've been told that until we change public opinion, politicians will not be prepared to back us.

The problem is that we have this debate in the absence of products. When was the last time you went into a supermarket and decided to buy some GM products? The answer is you can't because the products are not there. Supermarkets have just taken them off the shelves.

Brussels has become a place where you mix the precautionary principle and public perception as if they were the same thing.

What is the rest of the world doing? The rest of the world really doesn't care, but they bend over backwards to comply with the European standards. The rest of the developed world go about their own business. Europe is becoming less and less important trade wise. China and India now import huge amounts of grain to feed their animals.

What interests me most is how to get Europe to wake up to its global responsibility. I'd welcome any innovative ways of doing that.

Dr Bill Durodie:

Responding to Nathalie's point about it being better to be fed than dead, I don't think the argument about GMOs should be based around what people in the developing world need. I actually think there's an argument for GMOs here. I don't think that Lord Peter Melchitt, hiring an army of East Europeans to hand weed his organic crop is progress in the 21st century.

There's been an explosion of concern in recent years about food, about chemicals, about general well-being. And that's despite, on an objective level, clear evidence that people are living longer before, that most incidents of cancer are in remission largely to better treatment, and certainly all of the basic diseases that used to afflict the human race 50-100 years ago have now largely been dealt with.

One book in the UK pointed out that if you went back to the mid 1990s there were about 2000 references to the word risk in British broadsheet newspapers in any one year. By the end of the 90s that had gone up to 20,000 references. The question the book asked is: "Are we living in a world that's ten times more risky

or have we all become rather obsessed with risk”?

As for GMOs, Nathalie did a very good job on that. We have to accept that these are the most tested food products ever. There's nothing new about GMOs. One of the more astute media commentators pointed out that - when the Royal Society released their second review of GMOs - what was evident from the review was that scientists were not hesitant about the science of GM, they were hesitant about speaking out about it. When your experts say one thing in private, and another thing in public, then you've got a very different crisis on your hands; a crisis of confidence, of trust, but very little to do with science.

Mobile phones that fry your brain was also one of the popular panics over the last decade. Again, no scientific evidence for it. This was driven by cultural presumptions. The best example of this was given in Adam Burgess' book where he looks at the difference between how it got picked up in the North of Ireland to the South of Ireland. He points out that in the North, as we know, there's a history of two communities that have been at each other's throats for the last thirty years, and also they don't like the Brits coming along and putting mobile phone telecommunications masts in the back gardens. What happened was that some of the cynical politicians on the ground thought that it would be a fantastic campaign to get people to hold hands and not attack one another and campaign against something else. The South of Ireland presents an image to the world as one of the youngest demographic profiles in Europe embracing new technology, open to inward investment, hardly a debate at all.

So you can see that what on the surface can seem like a scientific debate, can have many cultural drivers that people seem to ignore.

MMR vaccine until Dr Andrew Wakefield came along with his slightly dubious paper in the Lancet - what should have happened is that other scientists should have ripped his paper to shreds on the basis that it used twelve self-selected cases. The consequences: there have been outbreaks of measles, mumps and rubella in the UK, with fatalities and no doubt disabilities for a larger number of people. So that's the price we paid in relation to the MMR panic.

The key thing is this: in addition to all of those pseudo-scientific scares, there is also an explosion of social fears over the last decade or two; fears about your doctor killing you (in the aftermath of the Harold Shipman trial). As a society, we are rather bad at dealing with bizarre risk - the consequence of Shipman for the UK has been because of one sick, twisted, bizarre idiot, nationally we have now instituted that doctors are not allowed to carry opiate or strong sedatives on home visits. So we have nationally instituted pain and suffering for everyone in order to avoid another Shipman.

Another example of that is in relation to fears about child abduction - I know Madeleine McCann is fairly regularly in the news at the moment - but we can

name pretty much all the famous cases that have occurred in recent years. Again, a few bizarre, twisted cases which have led, in the UK, to The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Bill, which means that every adult that comes close to a child will now have to have their criminal records checked. That's going to affect a third of the UK adult population. My fear is that what we're doing is actively teaching children that all adults are potential paedophiles that can't be trusted. I can't think of a more corrosive message to teach children, and yet we accept that as the price to pay for a handful of high profile cases.

Then there's been fear of crime, and more recently fear of international terrorism, which is what I've been focussing on for the last five or six years. Some of these risks are of course real; some are more virtual. But they've all got one common element which is a complete loss of a sense of proportionality.

If you go and read the European Commission's official document launching the precautionary principle in 2001/2002, it actually makes a point of saying that we need to apply the principle of proportionality in all of this, but that's the one thing that has been thrown out the window, as has reversibility.

In the last five minutes, what I really want to do is address why this is going on. Why do we live in a society like this? I believe there are two core driving factors. One is that as a society, we are now the most politically disengaged there has been since the franchise was universally extended just under a hundred years ago. This can be measured in many different ways: membership of trade unions; even the meaning of what a trade union is; party membership is also catastrophically declining; voter turnout is constantly in decline. So what's happened in recent times is quite an important phenomenon. At the same time as that, we have also become one of the most socially disconnected societies there has ever been. So, at the formal level we've abdicated responsibility - we don't vote, we're not members of political parties - and at the informal level of family groups, community networks, out of hours clubs and associations, people no longer participate in the way they did just twenty years ago. What I want to suggest to you is that the consequence of no longer being interested in the formal decision-making process in society, and at the same time all of your informal networks having been eroded, is that you are living life more on your own than anyone in living memory. And there's a price to pay for living on your own, which is that you feel slightly more insecure than you would have done otherwise. If I put you on your own on the middle of Dartmoor at 3:00 in the morning and start breaking a few sticks behind you, you will have a very different experience than if I put you there with thirty of your best friends. And it's not the risk that has changed, it's the perception of what's out there because of your sense of isolation. It's no surprise to me that a world where people disconnect becomes a world where people get paranoid, become very conscious of risk, and constantly demand that government should be protecting them from every possible ill.

The unfortunate final aspect to all this story is that government, lacking any vision of where it wants to take us in the 21st century, has bought into the agenda too. Politicians also feel isolated and unloved, and they desperately want to reconnect with the voter, so they're looking at voters and asking: "What drives you? Oh, you're paranoid about everything; ok, we'll protect you from everything". So government now has a new agenda, which is to become the societal risk managers of last resort. They have repackaged themselves, right across the board, as the people who will protect us from every ill. This is to their cost, ultimately, I would suggest. Rather than challenging people's perceptions and encouraging them to look at the real evidence, government now panders to people's fears and adapts its agendas to suit. Far from reassuring people, this actually drives people's fears because they think: "Yeah, there really are all those problems out there - look, the government's doing something about it. Look, they're setting up an independent group to look at mobile phones; they must fry your brains".

Is prevention better than cure? I would suggest not, not least because prevention demands that all of us are on the look out permanently for everything that might happen to us. I'm only going to die of one thing, so why should I be looking into every possible thing I might die of. At least 'cure' is targeted at the very people that need it, so it could be a more effective use of social resource. Prevention is only better than cure if the possibility of what you're trying to prevent is rather high (which, in most of these scare stories is not the case) and the treatment you're offering is known to be effective (which, again, in most of the cases we're talking about, is not the case). Imagine a problem which affects 10% of a population of a thousand people - so a hundred people are going to die of something. Now imagine a preventive treatment which is known to be 80% accurate - so 80 of the 100 people will be correctly screened and saved. This means that 20% of the 900 other people will be falsely screened and told that they have a problem. That's 180 people.

Screening on a permanent basis encourages people to be so aware that they actually physically become ill. We are a society that encourages people to become ill. After 9/11 there was a case of mass-psychogenic illness on the Maryland subway, where a number of people sat on the subway and collectively panicked about a chemical attack. 35 people had to be hospitalised because they were vomiting; they couldn't see any more; and it turned out to be window cleaning fluid.

I think the constant bombardment of these messages, combined with the fact that we live in what one French political scientist has described as a world without meaning, has created the worried world. And the government's obsession with focussing on lifestyle issues - smoking, drinking, eating, how you bring up your children, and now Gordon Brown's latest obsession with screening - is only going to make it worse. Worse than that, if you think about the screening message, Gordon Brown is about to reduce life down to merely prolonging its existence. If

your highest aspiration is survival, what does that tell you about government?
Health has replaced heaven as the nirvana for the 21st century. Never mind if it
was a good life, or if you achieved anything, just exist.