

New EU health commissioner airs his priorities

Tessa Richards *BMJ*

At last week's parliamentary hearing in Brussels, the new European Commissioner designate for health and consumer protection, David Byrne, said that the community must move on from its state of "near permanent crisis management" in response to public concern about issues such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), dioxin, and genetically modified organisms to take "a more proactive" stance on public health.

He also made a commitment to ensure "maximum transparency" in the formulation, presentation, and execution of EU policies related to his portfolio.

Acknowledging the current concerns of consumers, however, he promised that a white paper on food safety would be prepared quickly and its recommendations implemented by 2002. In response to specific questions from MEPs about BSE, growth

hormones in meat, and antibiotics in animal feeds, he said that he was in favour of introducing BSE testing of cattle carcasses across the European Union to assess disease prevalence, that there was sufficient evidence to justify continuing the EU ban of US meat, and that growth promoting antibiotics in animal feeds should be phased out.

If his position is confirmed on 15 September (and after his very competent performance at the hearing it is almost certain to be) he plans to tighten legislation related to animal feed and food production and improve traceability of products and product labelling. This was particularly important, he suggested, in relation to genetically modified food. Products that claimed to be free of genetically modified organisms but were derived from such organisms should be labelled as such.



David Byrne: public health will be a high priority

Rapid alert systems for a range of potential health threats including communicable diseases, contaminated blood products, and dangerous consumer products should be improved, he said, and member states must agree on a common definition of "serious and immediate risk." Questioned on the risk posed by soft polyvinylchloride (PVC) toys containing phthalates, he said that he was convinced they did pose a serious risk to child health and should be banned.

Mr Byrne's hearing was not all

plain sailing though. His response to a question on subsidising EU tobacco producers, disappointed campaigners on smoking and health. While admitting that there was an anomaly in opposing smoking yet giving subsidies, he said that he agreed with the agriculture commissioner, Franz Fischler, that phasing out subsidies would not reduce consumption but only increase imports from other tobacco growing countries.

When he was challenged by the chairwoman of the hearing, the British Conservative MEP Caroline Jackson, who pointed out that abolishing subsidies would, at the very least, have a huge symbolic impact and that the money saved could be spent on health education campaigns to discourage smoking, he went on the retreat. He had to stick to "his area of competence and work with his fellow commissioners," he claimed, although he promised to air these views. □

Details of the public hearings of the nominated commissioners appear on the commission's website (www.europa.eu.int).

Commons committee criticises Guy's fiasco

Annabel Ferriman *parliamentary correspondent, BMJ*

The redevelopment of Guy's Hospital, which was allowed to "spiral out of control for nine years before any sense of realism was applied," has been severely criticised by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee.

The final phase of the redevelopment, which in 1986 was estimated to cost £35m (\$56m), ended up costing £150m. Despite an innovative funding package, which should have found 45% of the costs from private and charitable donations, British taxpayers ended up paying for 78% of the project.

The public accounts committee highlights "serious failures" by the NHS Executive in failing to manage effectively the final part of the Guy's rebuilding programme. It says that the original

estimate of £35m was "completely inadequate," and it criticises both the Department of Health and the Treasury for approving the estimate, even though both had strong reservations about it. The unrealistic original estimate allowed the Guy's project to "secure a place in the queue for scarce NHS capital investment at the expense of other schemes."

In addition to a huge cost overrun, the Guy's project was also completed more than three years behind schedule.

The committee was highly critical of the lack of accountability for the mismanaged project. Over the course of the project there were six different project sponsors and five changes in project manager.

"We are disturbed that no one associated with this major failure of cost control and project management has been identified or disciplined," the committee said. □

Twenty-eighth Report: Department of Health: Cost Over-runs, Funding Problems and Delays on Guy's Hospital Phase III Development (HC289) is available from the Stationery Office, price £8.

Apo E4 gene linked to breast cancer

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Scientists at the University at Buffalo, New York, have found a possible link between a variant of the apolipoprotein E (apo E) gene and breast cancer. The gene, which is involved in lipid metabolism, has three variants: apolipoprotein E2, E3, and E4.

The apolipoprotein E4 variant is associated with raised concentrations of cholesterol and triglycerides and with an increased risk of coronary artery disease and Alzheimer's disease.

The researchers wanted to see whether the apo E genotype affected the association between triglycerides and the risk of breast cancer. They analysed blood samples from 256 women with primary breast cancer and 325 community controls, all from western New York state.

Among the women with one or two copies of the apo E4 gene,

those who also had high concentrations of triglycerides had four times the risk of developing breast cancer when compared with women with low triglyceride concentrations, said Dr Jo Freudenheim, an epidemiologist and professor of social and preventive medicine at the University at Buffalo.

Women with high triglyceride concentrations alone had a slightly increased risk of developing breast cancer. Women with the apo E4 gene alone (without high triglyceride concentrations) did not have an increased risk of breast cancer.

The study was presented this week at the meeting of the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology in Athens, Greece, by Dr Kirsten Moysich, a molecular epidemiologist at the University at Buffalo and the Roswell Park Cancer Institute, also in Buffalo. It has been accepted for publication in *Molecular Carcinogenesis*.

Dr Moysich said: "We think that apo E4 keeps serum triglyceride levels elevated by reducing their clearance. Triglycerides themselves appear to be a risk factor for breast cancer." □