

Parliamentary and Scientific Committee
'Communicating risk – what, who, why does it matter'
An online discussion meeting held in partnership with the Hazards Forum

190 attendees from very diverse backgrounds joined the webinar, and were welcomed by George Freeman MP, Chair of the P&SC; he observed that the term risk was often used in Parliamentary debate, but not necessarily understood.

Three guest panellists then gave us short presentations:

Richard Roff, Process Safety Director, Costain Group PLC & Chair of Hazards Forum Interest Group on Engineered Systems Risks spoke on 'Ten to the minus six: like that's ever going to happen! Reflections on the internal and external language of risks, tolerability, and trade-offs from Hazard Forums interest groups' Forum members are from engineering bodies, public and charity sectors, and industry, in 3 specialised groups; natural hazards, engineered system hazards, and emerging technology hazards. Hazard is not the same as risk, uncertainty can be hard to model, and difficult to understand. Discussing the varied language of risk, he advocated clear and meaningful communication, especially for non-specialist audiences. There are legal requirements to manage risk, but also individual vs societal attitudes to risk; some sectors have different attitudes. There is no such thing as Zero Risk; it is impossible to plan for every eventuality, and trade-offs must be made. Despite ever more complicated risk controls we may benefit from looking at inherently safer and simpler systems.

Professor Helen Meese, Founder and CEO of The Care Machine Ltd presented 'First do no harm: addressing the communication of risk in Health and MedTech'

Scientists and engineers should simplify without distorting data, contextualise risks with relatable examples and acknowledge uncertainties. Parliamentarians communicating risk should prioritise clarity, ask the right questions and avoid sensationalism. The health sector where she works is high risk; there are trade-offs in risk and timeframes. Societal tolerability of risk is another concern; better communication can bridge the gap between expert analysis and public sentiment. The difference between risk (known probabilities) and uncertainty (unknown probabilities) was explained; there is no such thing as Zero Risk in the health sector.

Effective risk communication in health care requires clarity and empathy, to empower informed decision making.

A solicitor's view came from Anne Davies, Partner, FisherBroyles (UK) LLP, in 'It will never happen to us' She specialises in the construction, agricultural and manufacturing industries. In court proceedings it is essential that experts can communicate to people who do not have knowledge of risk. Workplace safety cases are quite rare in court, and it is possible to overestimate how much juries and Judges can understand. Misfortunes can happen to all of us; it is useful to identify themes that occur in all sectors rather than focus on the facts of an incident. There are no new accidents just new people repeating them. Coroners are now obligated to produce Prevention of Future Deaths Reports (PFDs) if their investigations raise concerns that certain circumstances pose a risk of other deaths occurring or continuing to exist in the future. Many major Inquiries are set up, but often find similar factors caused by underestimation of risk.

Q&As included how we can we compare risks in a situation where people are very aware of known risks, with another where human intervention is an unknown quantity e.g. terrorist attack? It is impossible to predict such events, but steps can be taken to minimise resultant damage. The human factor is most important in risk management, but it is hard to defend court cases where unpredictable human behaviour is involved. Informed decisions in all organisations are desirable; there should be more information and training generally. We must be less optimistic/overconfident with risk. Complying with the regulations may not be good enough; people need better understanding. Parliamentarians could better educate themselves in risk, discussing the topic with all sectors they meet, and consulting experts in the Hazards Forum.

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