society for general Microbiology

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF ACDP CL4 AND SAPO4 MICROBIOLOGICAL CONTAINMENT FACILITIES

EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY THE SOCIETY FOR GENERAL MICROBIOLOGY (SGM)

Introduction

The Society for General Microbiology, founded in 1945, is an independent professional scientific body dedicated to promoting the 'art and science' of microbiology. It has now established itself as one of the two major societies in the world in its field, with some 5,000 members in the UK and abroad.

Comments

Facilities

With the exception of some Ministry of Defence establishments, the UK capacity for research on dangerous pathogenic material is lacking in facilities and training.

Modern, well maintained facilities are required for research on dangerous pathogens. Several Universities are building level 3 containment suites in order to increase the capacity to work with higher level pathogens and respond to emerging disease threats meaningfully. The state of the highest category containment laboratories (BSL 4) in the civil sector, such as at the Health Protection Agency and at the National Institute of Medical Research, has been deteriorating over time and will probably require significant capital investment in order to maintain state-of-the-art capacity.

Large animal facilities are in a deplorable state. These need to be provided centrally, as few, or no Universities would have a sufficient volume of work to sustain these on a full economic costs basis.

Training

It is the responsibility of research institutions working with hazardous biological agents to ensure that this research is safely conducted. All clinical and academic researchers, students and technicians working with hazardous agents should receive correct and specific training before they begin this work. Training programmes must include refreshers at regular intervals thereafter, including updates on regulatory developments.

Dedicated Biological Safety Officers (BSOs) in institutions must take the leading roles in responsibility for organizing and delivering effective staff training, tracking developments, and advising institutions' senior management. Government must ensure sufficient long-term funding is provided to key national institutions for provision of research facilities equipped to undertake work on these agents, and for retention of technical expertise in research institutions. Institutions themselves should develop appropriate succession planning arrangements to ensure continuity of skills within their staff.

While biosafety training provision for staff at universities and research institutions appears to be rigorous, there is a danger that the UK is gradually losing expertise to investigate and handle certain dangerous pathogens through previous lack of interest and lack of adequate funding, both in the medical and in the veterinary fields. Greater emphasis on training is needed; as the UK is a signatory to the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention, it needs to take its responsibility in this area more seriously. Reviews of training (which is controlled by individual facilities) should be more proactive.

About the SGM

Society membership is largely from universities, research institutions, health and veterinary services, government bodies and industry. The Society has a strong international following, with 25% of membership coming from outside the UK from some 60 countries.

The Society is a 'broad church'; its members are active in a wide range of aspects of microbiology, including medical and veterinary fields, environmental, agricultural and plant microbiology, food, water and industrial microbiology. Many members have specialized expertise in fields allied to microbiology, including biochemistry, molecular biology and genetics. The Society's membership includes distinguished, internationally-recognised experts in almost all fields of microbiology.

Among its activities the Society publishes four high quality, widely-read research journals (*Microbiology*, *Journal of Medical Microbiology*, *Journal of General Virology* and *International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology*). It also publishes a highly respected quarterly magazine, *Microbiology Today*, of considerable general educational value. Each year the Society holds two major scientific meetings attended by up to 1500 microbiologists and covering a wide range of aspects of microbiology and virology research.

The governing Council of the SGM has a strong commitment to improving awareness of the critically important role of microbiology in many aspects of human health, wealth and welfare. It has in this connection recently initiated a 'Microbiology Awareness Campaign' aimed at providing information to the government, decision makers, education authorities, media and the public of the major contribution of microbiology to society.

An issue of major concern to the Society is the national shortage of experienced microbiologists, particularly in the field of clinical microbiology and in industry. To attempt to improve this situation long-term, the Society runs an active educational programme focused on encouraging the teaching of microbiology in university and college courses and in the school curriculum, including primary schools. Some 415 schools are corporate members of SGM.

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