Northern Biological Safety Officers Meeting

Minutes of the meeting held on 28th November 2008 University of Manchester

1. Options for a single regulatory framework

The meeting opened with a presentation from the HSE Biological Agents Unit and associated policy staff who outlined the options for a single regulatory framework (SRF) for work with pathogens (human, animal and genetically modified micro-organisms).

These proposals were being developed as a result of recommendations made in the Callaghan review following the release of Foot and Mouth Disease virus in 2007.

A number of options for regulating work with pathogens had been considered, but a single set of regulations combining the biological agents aspects of COSHH, SAPO and the GM(CU) Regulations was seen as the best way forward.

A number of assumptions had been made in progressing the new regulations:

- There would be 4 defined Hazard Groups for all pathogens in scope;
- All laboratories where work with pathogens in scope was undertaken would be assigned to one of 4 Containment Levels;
- The regulations would be activity based, with each activity being assigned to one of 4 classes (using the GM(CU) regulations as a model).

Copies of the presentation were made available at the meeting (electronic version also available on the SRF Community of Interest webpages – http://webcommunities.hse.gov.uk/inovem/inovem.ti/biosafety.callaghan/grouphome - members were encouraged to join the group and actively participate in discussions)

The meeting then broke into two groups to discuss issues arising from the implementation of the SRF in more detail.

Group A – issues discussed included the potential scope of the regulations, in particular whether work with potentially infectious material would be notifiable especially if there was no intent to isolate any pathogens that might be present. If such work were included this could have significant impact on the academic and diagnostic community.

Group B – issues discussed included cost recovery, distinguishing intentional work with agents from non-intentional work, consistency with transport regulations and the role of the biosafety committee.

2. Minutes of last meeting

These were agreed.

3. Agreement of statement of intent

The key aims set out in the statement of intent (circulated) that had been prepared by the NBSO Steering Group were outlined. This statement was intended to capture the ways of working of the NBSOs eg frequency of meetings, location of meetings and means of participation, and to provide a framework for the future direction of the group. It was noted that, as regards membership, more needed to be done to encourage NHS/HPA and private companies eg pharmaceutical companies to join.

There was general agreement with the statement of intent.

4. Steering group report

A report was given on the activities of the NBOs Steering Group that had been set up following the last meeting of the NBOs in July 2008. Since the group had been asked to clarify the relationship of the NBSOs with ISTR, a member of the ISTR Executive Council – ISTR EC present at the meeting responded. It was explained that following moves several years ago to raise the profile and enhance biosafety professionalism, ISTR had set up a Bio-group and were now holding annual Biosafety Symposia. There were three regional BSO groups which made up the Bio-group (Northern, Southern and Midlands) and these were viewed as being affiliated to the ISTR. NBSOs were encouraged to retain this affiliation as it was important to have a single biosafety voice in the UK. The availability of funds would be explored with the ISTR EC so that local groups could fund external speakers if required. Finally, it was suggested that it would be possible to co-opt a member of the NBOs onto the ISTR EC as means of maintaining the links with the regional groups.

It was agreed that affiliation was useful and should be maintained but that some element of independence would need to be retained as not all members of NBSOs would necessarily be (or want to be) members of ISTR and membership of ISTR should not be seen as a prerequisite for attending NBOS meetings. As a result of this, it had been agreed that as part of the move to make NBOs meeting agendas and minutes available to the wider biosafety community, they would be posted on the public section of the ISTR website.

A report was given on the findings of the survey on role of the BSO/BSA following initial discussions at the previous meeting. Initial findings were that the role was extremely complex and highly variable. A further more detailed analysis would be presented at a subsequent meeting. It was suggested that given the range of disciplines/subject areas covered by the group, it would be useful to ask individuals to update the group on key biosafety issues relating to specific disciplines at meetings.

The agenda for the next meeting was outlined - NaCTSO had agreed to speak on personnel checks for staff working with Schedule 5 agents and a presentation would be given on the CEN standard for Laboratory Biorisk Management. The next meeting would take place in Glasgow in May 2009.

It was noted that Level 1 of the ISTR accredited training scheme for Biosafety Practitioners had been launched – the ISTR website had further information including calls for training providers and assessors. Level 2 was scheduled for launch

later in 2009 and would be CPD-based; the issue of “grandfather” rights had yet to be resolved.

5. Feedback from regulatory visits

A recent SAPO inspection of a Scottish University had prompted concerns about the interpretation of the DEFRA guidance on treatment and disposal of waste.

6. Current issues

It was agreed that this would be a standing agenda item at future meetings and would be based on topics raised on HASNET-Bio as well as any issues raised by members. Two topics were suggested for discussion; the use of VHP and the effects of REACH on certain chemical usage eg formalin for fixing tissues/body parts.