

Experts want 'more science' in EU policy-making

Politicians must not hide behind science, says NGO

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Experts meeting in Ireland this week hotly debated the role of risk and risk management in chemicals regulation, with industry representatives, NGOs and policy makers arguing for a **more** science-based approach.

MEP Julie Girling, who recently set up an informal risk management group within the European Parliament, set the tenor of the conference in Dublin. She argued against the use of "emotive arguments and political pressure" when making policy (CW Briefing May 2013). Instead she called for a balanced approach, and suggested that a recent report by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) in the UK on *Chemical exposures during pregnancy* failed to meet this aim (CW 6 June 2013). Any report put into the public domain should be substantiated with science, she said.

The MEP also questioned the scientific basis of the Parliament's own initiative report on endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) (CW 14 March 2013). "It lacks scientific foundation because it is from the Parliament, and has therefore not undergone a wide stakeholder consultation or an impact assessment," she said. Ms Girling considers that parts of the report are at odds with scientific evidence, by calling, for example, for EDCs to be thought of as non-threshold substances and by making links with disorders, which she said were far from proven.

It had been one of her saddest days since becoming an MEP when the initiative report went through plenary "without a murmur", and only around 100 MEPs voting against it, Ms Girling said. Even though the text has no legal standing, "certain groups" will now present it as the Parliament's position, she added.

One way of improving scientific advice to the Parliament would be to "remove the stigma attached to the consulting industry," said Ms Girling. "We have to make sure we are not ashamed of talking to scientists, industry and business, and to ask business to take on that role." These groups "tend to shrink into the background; they are not defending their position as much as they should".

"We all agree that we need **more** science, a better understanding of science," said Mikael Karlsson, president of the NGO the European Environmental Bureau (EEB). "That is obvious." But he said that even when there was clear science, politicians did not always listen to the scientific message.

"We have had clear messages for decades on chemicals where politicians are not acting," he said. He gave the example of parliamentarians, including Ms Girling, arguing against registering certain pharmaceuticals as priority substances in EU surface waters (CW 18 April 2013). This was based on economic arguments, said Dr Karlsson, which were valid, but not scientific. He suggested that politicians should be **more** transparent about why they took certain decisions. "Politicians should stand up to the decisions they make," and not use science to hide behind, he said.

It is also evident that science is not telling us everything and that in some areas we have huge data gaps, Dr Karlsson said, citing EDCs as one example. He urged better use of the precautionary principle and the use of both risk and hazard assessments when dealing with potentially hazardous substances. "We need **more** impact assessments and need to look also at cost of no action," he added.

He also cautioned against giving the go ahead to a chemical without sufficient data. "It is very easy to put a chemical on the market, but difficult to get it taken off. Even when it is dangerous for children it can take five to ten years to do this."

Philippa Jones in Dublin

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