

House of Commons Science and Technology Committee: Independent scientific advice**Response by the Wellcome Trust**

December 2009

1. The Wellcome Trust is the largest charity in the UK. It funds innovative biomedical research, in the UK and internationally, spending over £600 million each year to support the brightest scientists with the best ideas. The Wellcome Trust supports public debate about biomedical research and its impact on health and wellbeing.
2. Government policy must be informed by the best available evidence. It is therefore essential that scientific advice is effectively incorporated into policy making, and that policy makers and academics have productive working relationships. There must be confidence and trust on both sides.
3. A recent report by the Council for Science and Technology¹ found that engagement between academics and policy makers in the UK is “not as strong as it might be”. More importantly, the report concluded that “where incidents occur which damage the trust between academics and policy makers they have a disproportionate impact and risk badly impacting the longer-term relationship. Such incidents should therefore be taken very seriously.”
4. We therefore welcome the Committee’s interest in this issue, and the desire to ensure that scientific advisers are free to give independent advice without government interference, following the unfortunate Nutt case.
5. However, it is essential to recognise that scientific advice is just one part of the policy making process. The Government’s own Code of Practice² makes clear what the different roles of a scientific adviser and Government should be:
“A scientific adviser... is generally responsible for providing scientific input to assist policymaking or analysis. This should include highlighting issues likely to be of future concern that lie within their terms of reference. The task of policy making, which is essentially one for government, can be thought of as working up practical options for responses to the problem on which scientific advice has been sought, analysing those options and making decisions on them.”
6. The Council of Science and Technology also recognised that “policy decisions involve difficult choices that need to take account of a very wide range of factors. Academics must recognise that where a particular view does not prevail, or where decisions are taken for political reasons, this does not mean the academic input was not valued.”
7. These points must be kept in mind when considering the development of new guidance. The Committee must take care to ensure that any principles developed as a result of this one case

¹ How academia and government can work together, Council for Science and Technology, October 2008

² Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees, Government Office for Science, December 2007

are both enduring and applicable to a wide range of future cases. We suggest it may be more appropriate to build on the existing guidance, adding statements about academic freedom and independence of operation to the current Code of Practice rather than to introduce separate and free-standing principles.

8. We also make the following specific comments on the draft Statement of Principles:

2.3: Advisory committees need the service of an independent press office

We question whether this is necessary, or an appropriate use of resource. The role of a scientific advisory committee is to advise Government. While we agree that scientific advisory committee reports, advice and minutes of meetings should be made publicly available, as set out in the Code of Practice, we do not see why this would require the services of an independent press office. The Code of Practice already makes reference to the need for scientific advisory committees to decide on who should represent them to the media.

3.1: Reports will not be criticised or rejected prior to publication

This sentence needs clarification to specify that it refers to criticism or rejection by Government alone. Committee reports will often be subject to scrutiny by peer review before publication and benefit from any criticism received in such a process.

9. It is essential that scientific advice should be given and received in a transparent manner. We encourage the Committee to develop a response that ensures that robust scientific advice informs policy making in a transparent way, while at the same time recognising that scientific advice is not the only factor that needs to be taken into account when politicians make decisions.