

Principles on the treatment of independent scientific advice provided to government

Campaign for Science & Engineering

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1. The dismissal of Professor David Nutt as chair of the Advisory Council on Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) has shown deficiencies in the government's scientific advisory system. CaSE believes that government should respond to this episode by developing a code of conduct for ministers on scientific advice and advisers based upon the Principles of Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice. It should also consider this episode when updating the Guidelines on Scientific Analysis in Policymaking. There is a need to look at the Code of Conduct for Scientific Advisory Committee as well with respect to this dismissal of advisers. The critical issue is to strengthen the integrity of the scientific advisory system.

Academic Freedom

2. The Guidelines on Scientific Advice in Policymaking and the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees both the support and encourage scientific advisers to be open and transparent with their advice and expertise. Therefore membership of a scientific advisory committee should not curtail a scientist's ability to communicate to their peers and the public. The only constraints in terms of participating on scientific advisory committees is with respect to confidential material and that scientific advisers should be clear when they are speaking on behalf of the advisory committee and when they are speaking personally. The Guidelines and the Code of Conduct on Scientific Advisory Committees do not need to be updated in this area.
3. What is needed is for ministers to be made aware that government guidelines both encourage and enable scientific advisers to communicate to the public. The Principles document would help make this happen.

Independence

4. The Principles document needs to guarantee the right of scientific advisers to publish or communicate to their peers, parliament or the public about their expertise even if it challenges government policy. If scientific advisers feel that they have to curtail their communication so that it fits with government policy then that will be a grave mistake for science and policymaking.
5. Scientific advisory committees should be protected from political interference in terms of their analysis of the evidence relevant to their remit. However, the scientific advice they have been asked to give is meant to inform policy so there will be a political element to their advisory process. It is appropriate for scientific advisory committees to meet with ministers and senior civil servants to discuss their work. It is also important that when a minister or government department references an advisory committees work that it is a fair representation of the evidence or their advice. If it is not, scientific advisers need to be free to disclose misrepresentation, censorship, and other abuses of the scientific advisory system.

Media engagement

6. Although it is technically possible there should be greater freedom given to scientific advisory committees to use press offices outside of the department they report to. The communication of independent scientific advice for government would benefit from being taken outside of government departments. That way the work of the scientific advisory committee can be debated in its own right.

Consideration of scientific advice

7. The Principles document sets out some clear statements on how ministers should handle scientific advice. All scientific advisory committee reports must be published unless there are specific statutory limitations, such as national security.
8. Ministers should not to undermine the scientific advisory process by taking a specific policy line on an issue after asking for advice and before receiving it. It is the right of ministers to make the policy decision, but if they reject a scientific advisory committee recommendation they should publish their reasons for doing so. Both scientific advisory committees and their members should not be curtailed from discussing the evidence behind rejected recommendations.

Dismissal of scientific advisory committee members

9. When the Home Secretary removed Professor Nutt from the ACMD he established a new precedent that scientific advisers can be summarily dismissed by ministers. Both the Principles document and the Code of Conduct for Scientific Advisory Committees need to have a statement that gives clarity to ministers and advisers about how and why an adviser can be removed from their position. The Government Chief Scientific Adviser must be consulted prior to a scientific adviser being dismissed from their position by a minister.

Role of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser

10. The Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) has a critical role in ensuring that the ministers appreciate and adhere to the guidelines, codes and principles that govern the scientific advisory system. At the bottom of the Principles document should be the GCSA's name and number. The GCSA should be consulted by ministers when there are issues with science and engineering advice in government. The GCSA should take a more active role when there are issues between ministers and scientific advisers, especially if a minister wants to dismiss a scientific adviser.

Conclusion

11. The UK's governance of scientific advice has developed and been strengthened in response to crisis. The dismissal of Professor Nutt should be taken as opportunity to strengthen the scientific advisory system as it highlighted serious issues in terms of how ministers handle scientific advisers and advice. There are guidelines and a code of conduct for scientific advisers, what is needed now is a code of conduct for ministers in how they handle scientific advice and advisers that is developed from the Principles document.