

Talking About Risk - Truth, Lies and Total Confusion

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The introduction to this session will briefly review:

1. In 1992 sociologist Ulrich Beck first coined the phrase 'The Risk Society'.
(www1.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/undergraduate/introsoc/ubeck.html)

- Are we more at risk from some hazards to health than in the past?
- Have our perception of risk changed?
- What happens when we move from 'rationing by scarcity' to 'affordable abundance'?

2. Why does The Royal Society for the Promotion of Health believe it is important to talk about risk? What are the threats to public health if debates about risk become unmoored from reality?

3. What contributions do Government, Regulators, Food Industry/farming/other commercial organisations/Single-issue pressure groups/Press play in public perceptions or risk?

4. Ways of looking at risk:

- What is 'the colonisation of risk'?
- Is risk a commodity which is 'traded'?
- What is the effect of
- What is the price of being wrong?
- Risk as a management tool
- What is the impact of 'compensation culture'?
- What is the existential value of being 'at risk'?
- Is it all a big game?

Truth

- Did John Selwyn Gummer tell the truth about BSE when he fed his daughter a hamburger?
- Did government tell the truth over MMR?
- Did Edwina Currie tell the truth about salmonella in eggs?

Lies

- Do one million Britons have an eating disorder?
- Do 1/3 of people have an allergy?
- Are 1/3 of child deaths in Europe due to the environment?

Total Confusion

- Sudan 1 dye
- Chemicals in the environment

One view of risk:

'The public's perceptions of risk may be different from those of the 'experts' but it is a waste of time trying to educate the public to perceive risks in the same way as expert – rather our research shows that bridging the gap requires new ways of listening to and understanding consumers. Our perceptions of risk, need to be understood, acknowledged and valued – and harnessed to shape risk communication messages. For example, we know people are more anxious about an 'immediate' risk – such as a food contamination scare – than they are about longer-term risks e.g. of an unhealthy diet. We also know that people are more anxious about risks that affect children and about risks that are less well understood or novel. Also their perceive risks that they have little or no control over as less acceptable than those where they can exercise a choice. We also weigh risks against benefits – which helps explain why people are generally prepared to accept the uncertain risks from mobile phone radiation while rejecting the uncertain risks from GM foods.'

Dame Deirdre Hutton, Chair, National Consumer Council