

nature

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Risk adviser: mission impossible?

AN idea that has received wide publicity in the past week or two has been the concept of an independent community risk advisory service. Professor Gordon Atherley, of the University of Aston in Birmingham, presented the idea to the Council for Science and Society's meeting on acceptable risk and proposed that the council should take some initiatives itself to establish such a service. For its part, the council, in its forthcoming report on the acceptability of risks, commends the idea—'only in such a way can there develop an involvement of people experiencing risks, which is so necessary for fair decisions and effective control'.

There are many attractions to the idea. Professor Atherley envisages the scheme being staffed by a small band of volunteers with a scientific training who would agree to attend 'clinics' regularly in local communities to listen to and advise on problems connected with risk. The council suggests a full-time paid adviser, using part-time help. The concept would certainly be moving with the social tide, which is undoubtedly flowing away from monolithic centralised organisations towards local, more informal bodies. And analogies can be found, for instance in community law centres set up to help those who might be overawed by the legal establishment or its fees. The intention is that in the main the adviser would act as a source of information, maybe doing a little monitoring or research himself or herself. The proposal is clearly thoroughly worthy, in keeping with the council's previous institutional suggestions. But the question is, is it workable?

It is certainly going to tread on a few toes. The relationship of 'risk' to pollution, infectious diseases, safety at work, hygiene, public order, nuclear safety, fire and explosive hazards and road and rail safety is going to be hard to define. In all of these there are already deeply entrenched interests working at local or national level; it is certainly not clear that such interests, many of which have an excellent if unpublicised track record, will take at all kindly to a new figure in the community. This need be no bad thing if the community risk adviser were able to pursue an independent course of research, but this is most unlikely—in many matters the adviser will have to depend on these very organisations for data and even interpretation. Can this be done without the generation of ill-will or corruption? Of course a risk adviser would

ideally be on the lookout for new risks for which no control mechanism yet existed and might, for instance, have some success in the field of noise; but in most other fields he or she might need almost extra-sensory perception to foresee the extraordinary ways in which risk appear.

However attractive the idea of spreading information about risks around the community in the same way that a legal service answers questions about the law and a consumer bureau provides ratings of relative value for money, there is a danger that the function of a specifically risk-oriented agency would be misunderstood as a place where answers would be given. And then, of course, the community would quickly turn on an adviser whose subjunctive-ridden replies had been misunderstood as authoritative pronouncements and proved wrong by later events. Would this make for a fulfilling job for a community risk adviser? It is perhaps in questions about the calibre of a person who would do such a job that we have the most serious reservations. Unpaid volunteers, says Professor Atherley; £3,500 per year, says the council—it is difficult to be serious about a scheme relying so much on voluntary involvement or modest salaries. The community risk adviser would have to be such a paragon of virtue, so widely knowledgeable, so unswayed by pressure groups, so diplomatic in dealing with toe-trodden agencies, so tough in living with decisions, that it is doubtful that many likely candidates exist.

That a community risk adviser may not be the way to go does not, however, close the issue. The social tide is still flowing and the public is bound to want to know more and not less about hazards and nuisances. An immense amount of expertise already exists in the existing agencies and it seems desirable that before we set up yet another we should look very carefully at how well the present agencies present themselves to the public. It is as yet by no means clear whom one should write to, phone or go and see when worried about potential or actual hazards. More informative telephone directories, advertising on television and in newspapers would all help to encourage the public to take a less Kafkaesque view of governmental agencies. If in a few years there was no growing sense of public participation in coming to terms with risks, then it might be time to try and set up a risk advisory service. But let the present agencies show their paces first. □