WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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Report on meetings of expert committees and study groups[1]

Report by the Secretariat

EVALUATION OF CERTAIN FOOD ADDITIVES AND CONTAMINANTS

Fifty-fifth report of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives Geneva, 6-15 June 2000[2]

Main recommendations

1. The Committee evaluated the following food additives using normal toxicological procedures: the flavouring agent furfural; the food colour caramel colour II; the sweetening agents aspartame-acesulfame salt and D-tagatose, and the miscellaneous substance trehalose. Acceptable daily intakes (ADIs) were allocated to all these substances except for D-tagatose. The use of paprika oleoresin as a spice was considered to be acceptable, based on its evaluation at an earlier meeting. Upon reviewing the available information, the Committee concluded that cochineal extract and carmines may be allergenic. The data were insufficient for evaluating proposed additional uses of benzoyl peroxide, nitrous oxide and stearyl tartrate. The Committee prepared new or revised specifications for the identity and purity of the food additives that were evaluated toxicologically and considered specifications for 45 other food additives.

2. The Committee evaluated 124 flavouring agents in four chemical groups using the Procedure for the Safety Evaluation of Flavouring Agents. On the basis of the toxicological, metabolic and intake data on these flavouring agents and their structural characteristics, the Committee concluded that none of them would present safety concerns at the current estimated levels of intake.

3. The Committee evaluated the contaminants cadmium and tin. It maintained the provisional tolerable weekly intake (PTWI) for cadmium of 7 μg/kg of body weight. Ranges of predicted dietary intakes that may be associated with an excess prevalence of renal tubule dysfunction were estimated; these values provide an indication of the risk at various levels of intake for potentially sensitive groups

[1] The Regulations for Expert Advisory Panels and Committees provide that the Director-General shall submit to the Executive Board a report of expert committees containing observations on the implications of the expert committee reports and recommendations on the follow-up action to be taken.

[2] WHO Technical Report Series, No. 901, 2001.

within the population. The Committee assessed the acute toxicity of tin, but the data were insufficient for establishing an acute reference dose. The PTWI of 14 mg/kg of body weight was not reconsidered and was maintained.

4. The data were insufficient to make an assessment of the intake of calcium from calcium salts of food additives.

5. Summaries of the toxicological and related information which served as the basis for the Committee's evaluations of the safety of these food additives have been published separately by WHO.[1] Specifications have been published by FAO.[2]

Significance for public health policies

6. The Committee's work emphasizes the public health significance of the risk assessment of chemicals used in food. It highlights the complexity of the process, which includes assembling and analysing all relevant data; interpreting the results of toxicity studies, for example for carcinogenicity, genotoxicity, reproductive toxicity and teratogenicity; extrapolating to humans the effects observed in experimental animals; and characterizing hazards to humans based on available toxicological and epidemiological data.

7. Although all Member States face the problem of assessing potential risks of chemicals in food, only a few scientific institutions can assess the relevant toxicological and related data at this stage. Therefore it is important that Member States are provided with valid information on both the general aspects of risk assessment and specific food additives and contaminants so that risks can be assessed at the national level.

8. The Committee's recommendations are used by the Codex Alimentarius Commission for setting international food standards. Such standards are established only for substances that have been evaluated by the Committee and have been allocated an ADI (food additives) or for which a tolerable intake level has been established or potencies have been estimated (contaminants). This approach ensures that food commodities in international trade meet strict safety standards.

Implications for the Organization's programmes

9. The Committee continually evaluates chemicals in food. It held four meetings in 2000-2001: two on food additives and contaminants, one on contaminants, and one on residues of veterinary drugs in food. Four meetings are scheduled during 2002-2003.

10. WHO is a partner in the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme, which administers the Codex Alimentarius Commission. The Committee's work is crucial for that of the Commission.

11. Regional offices and WHO Representatives also use the Committee's evaluations when advising Member States on food safety regulatory programmes.

[1] *Safety evaluation of certain food additives and contaminants.* WHO Food Additives Series, No. 46, 2001.

[2] *Compendium of food additive specifications, Addendum 8.* FAO Food and Nutrition Paper, No. 52, Add.8, 2000.

EVALUATION OF DEPENDENCE-PRODUCING DRUGS

Thirty-second report of the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence Geneva, 12-15 September 2000[1]

Main recommendations

12. Since its first meeting in 1949, the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence has regularly reviewed medical and scientific information on psychoactive substances and recommended their classification under the relevant international drug-control conventions. At its latest meeting, the Committee reviewed six substances and recommended four of them for international control as follows: 2C-B (4-bromo-2,5-dimethoxyphenethylamine) for inclusion in Schedule II, 4-MTA (4-methylthioamphetamine) for inclusion in Schedule I, and GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyric acid) and zolpidem (INN) for inclusion in Schedule IV of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances. The Committee also selected five substances (amfepramone, amineptine, buprenorphien, Δ^9-tetrahydrocannabinol and tramadol) for future review.

13. In response to a specific request at the Forty-second Session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the Committee further considered ephedrine, which had previously been recommended for control as a psychotropic substance, and concluded that its control as such would no longer be necessary in the light of the new review guidelines.[2] The Committee also adopted interpretation guidelines in order to clarify the scope of control concerning stereoisomers of psychotropic substances.

Significance for public health policies

14. In accordance with the new review guidelines,[2] the resultant recommendations concerning the international control of the four substances were posted on the Internet for the first time. This action enabled all interested parties to have quick and easy access to the recommendations and facilitated their adoption by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. The timely updating of the list of controlled drugs thus achieved has kept the international drug-control system responsive to the changing patterns of drug abuse.

15. With regard to the scope of control over stereoisomers of psychotropic substances, there was some confusion due to inconsistencies in the present nomenclature of these substances listed in the Schedules. Such confusion, which hampered the concerted implementation of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, has been clarified by interpretation guidelines that were endorsed subsequently by the International Narcotics Control Board.

Implications for the Organization's programmes

16. The selection of the five substances for future review by the Committee indicates the necessity for the continued input of the Organization in the area of international drug control, even though the pace of development of new drugs appears to have slowed somewhat in recent years.

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[1] WHO Technical Report Series, No. 903, in press.

[2] Guidelines for the WHO review of dependence-producing psychoactive substances for international control, as adopted by the Executive Board at its 105th session in decision EB105(3); see document EB105/2000/REC/1, Annex 9.

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