Public health: endocrine disrupters, consequences on human and animal health

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PURPOSE : to present the Communication on a Community Strategy for Endocrine Disrupters, a range of substances suspected of interfering with the hormone systems of humans and wildlife. CONTENT : the strategy focuses on man-made substances, including chemicals and synthetic hormones, which may harm health and cause cancer, behavioural changes and reproductive abnormalities. The objectives of the new strategy are to identify the problem of endocrine disruption, its causes and consequences, and to identify appropriate policy action on the basis of the precautionary principle in order to respond quickly and effectively to the problem. The strategy points to the need for further research, international cooperation, communication to the public and appropriate policy action and identifies actions in the short, medium and long-term to meet these requirements. The endocrine system consists of a set of glands and the hormones they produce, which help guide the development, growth, reproduction and behaviour of animals and human beings. There is a growing concern about a range of man-made substances which are designed for use in industry, agriculture and consumer goods as well as substances produced as a by-product of industrial processes. These substances are now suspected of interfering with the endocrine system. In October 1998, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution calling upon the Commission to take action in this area to improve the legislative framework, reinforce research efforts and to make information available to the public. In March 1999, the Scientific Committee for Toxicity, Ecotoxicity and the Environment (SCTEE) issued a report, "Human and Wildlife Health Effects of Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals, with emphasis on Wildlife and on Ecotoxicology test methods". The report identifies a "potential global problem" for wildlife. It also states that "impaired reproduction and development causally linked to the endocrine disrupting chemicals are well-documented in a number of wildlife species and have caused local and population changes". Against this background, the Commission Communication on the new strategy has identified 4 key requirements to address the phenomenon of endocrine disruption: further research; international cooperation; communication to the public; and appropriate policy action. Short, medium and long-term action is proposed to cover these requirements. In the short term, the Commission intends to gather scientific evidence on the substances for further evaluation of their role in endocrine disruption. Once these substances are identified, the Commission urges the Member States to make use of the existing legislative instruments to their full, where appropriate. The Commission considers it equally essential to alleviate public concern by communicating effectively. Lastly, international cooperation and coordination is necessary to make the best use of available resources and to avoid duplication of efforts. In the medium term, it is essential that the Commission and the Member States ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to the development of agreed test methods within theframework of the OECD and to the development of an appropriate EU testing strategy. Results of ongoing research projects need to be fed into the policy process. Research and development efforts under the Community's Fifth Framework Programme on Research and Development (R&D) need to be strengthened. In addition, identification of substitutes and consideration of voluntary initiatives will be important in order to eliminate or find replacements for substances of concern. In the long term, it will necessary for the Commission to envisage proposing the adaptation and/or amendment to present EU legislative instruments, which cover those substances as well as consumer health and environmental protection disrupting effects.