INVITED EDITORIAL

ICRP comes up trumps

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ICRP comes up trumps

As someone who has on occasion been critical in the pages of this Journal (2000 J. Radiol. Prot. 20 328–331; 2001 J. Radiol. Prot. 21 101–103; 2003 J. Radiol. Prot. 23 119–120) of the direction that ICRP appeared to be taking during the process of revision of the basic recommendations, I am very pleased to be able to express my compliments to ICRP on the latest draft for comment. The current draft sets out its objectives very clearly and, in my view, they are exactly in line with what the profession wants:

‘While recognising the need for stability in international and national regulations, the Commission has decided to issue these revised recommendations having three primary aims in mind:

• To take account of new biological and physical information and of trends in the setting of radiation safety standards;
• To improve and streamline the presentation of the recommendations; and
• To maintain as much stability in the recommendations as is consistent with the new scientific information.’

More to the point what is ‘inside the tin’ is exactly what it says ‘on the label’. In particular the three fundamental principles of radiological protection, namely justification, optimisation and dose limitation are restated but retained, and the draft clarifies how they apply to radiation sources delivering exposure and to individuals receiving exposure. There is more emphasis on source-related constraints and optimisation. The separation of types of exposure into occupational exposure, medical exposure of patients and public exposure is retained and serves to identify the categories of exposed individuals. The individual dose limits for effective dose and equivalent dose from all regulated sources are unchanged. The only substantial change at this level of the system appears to be the clear division of exposure situations into planned, emergency and existing exposure situations. This is a useful clarification and distinction and should remove much of the confusion over the application of interventions in the two latter conditions. The use of constraints has been unified but the application to specific exposure situations maintained.

It now seems a long time ago that Roger Clarke startled the radiological protection community with his challenging paper ‘Control of low-level radiation exposure: time for a change?’ (1999 J. Radiol. Prot. 19 107–115). As some readers may recall, Roger suggested a number of possibilities for fundamental change including dropping the principle of justification, no longer distinguishing between occupational, public and medical exposures, dropping the dose limit for the public and abandoning collective dose as then defined. At the end of the paper he said that ICRP would welcome a wide discussion—this they certainly got. This discussion has been an intensive process involving many individuals and organisations—in my case primarily IRPA and its associated Societies and the two IRPA Congresses in Hiroshima in 2000 and Madrid in 2004—but it has caused a thorough re-examination of the ICRP principles and their application in regulatory systems and in operation. The fact that this process has arrived back at a system of protection that is similar to the current system should be heartening for all concerned that we have not been ‘ploughing the wrong
furrow’ for the last few decades. ICRP and Roger in particular, should be very satisfied with the outcome of the extended and open consultation process that deeply involved their ‘stakeholders’. It would have been easier, and quite tempting, for the Commission to treat the consultation as a publicity exercise but it has become very clear over the last few years that the members of the Commission came to meetings, presented their ideas, listened, and took note.

I suspect there will be some tidying up of the current draft, in particular some of the later chapters are a bit repetitive, but I think we can look forward with confidence to the new recommendations being clear, relatively easy to accommodate in both a regulatory and practical sense, and to their resolving some of the real difficulties that have been identified.

I should perhaps conclude by saying that these are personal views; I do not know the outcome of either the SRP or the IRPA consultations on the present draft.

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