Working with biological agents

Introduction

Work with biological material undertaken by Medical Research Council (MRC) staff and those working under the management and supervision of MRC staff represents a significant proportion of the total research programme.

All work with biological agents must meet legislative requirements. Compliance with the content of this Policy Note and the associated guidance will ensure that these requirements are met. Details can be found within individual guidance notes.

Policy

It is the policy of the MRC to achieve the highest working standards that are reasonably practicable for all work with biological agents in order to safeguard the health and safety of its staff and all persons that might be affected by those activities, and to protect the environment.

This is achieved through risk assessment and control, appropriate training and the provision of suitable facilities in which to work with biological agents.

Definitions and scope

The COSHH Regulations define 'biological agent' as 'a micro-organism, cell culture, or human endoparasite, whether or not genetically modified, which may cause infection, allergy, toxicity or otherwise create a hazard to human health'. The definition thus covers not only all known pathogenic micro-organisms but also any material, for example human tissue, that may harbour such a micro-organism.

This policy note also considers work with animals and animal or plant pathogens and the definition of 'biological agent' should be expanded to take these factors into consideration.

Action

Directors and External Scientific Staff (ESS) Team Leaders are responsible for the implementation of this policy.

The actions required are set out in the Director’s Summary.

This policy and guidance is available on our website at http://extra.mrc.ac.uk/H&S/welcome.html.

Version 1 July 2003
Director’s summary

Scope of policy and guidance

A considerable proportion of MRC research involves the use of biological material. All such work requires a suitable risk assessment and consequently appropriate measures to ensure safe working with the material. These measures will include preparation of procedures and codes of practice, training of laboratory personnel and the provision of suitable facilities.

The associated guidance is divided into three main sections:

**Part A**  
The management of work with biological material
This includes the appointment of key personnel, the function of safety committees and laboratory management

**Part B**  
Working with biological hazards
This includes work with pathogens, genetically modified organisms, cell culture, human material, animals, animal and plant pathogens and the use of staff as volunteers specifically for donation of blood.

**Part C**  
Key laboratory equipment and associated practices
This includes microbiological safety cabinets, centrifuges and decontamination and disinfection methods including the use of autoclaves.

**Action**

Each Director and ESS Team Leader is responsible for the implementation of MRC Policy. The means of ensuring appropriate implementation are included in the associated Guidance. For units and team associated with a host institution the appointment of key personnel will in part depend on local arrangements. As a minimum however directors and team leaders must ensure suitable risk assessment are made for the work and that the work is then done in appropriate facilities with suitably trained personnel.

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