



Managing risks of misuse associated with grant funding activities

A joint BBSRC, MRC and Wellcome Trust policy statement

The BBSRC, the MRC and the Wellcome Trust have each issued position statements on bioterrorism and biomedical research. These cover issues such as: balancing benefit and risk; funding decisions; dissemination of research; international collaboration and training; and promoting research best practice and ensuring public trust. The position statements are available on the organisations' websites.

The position statements propose that a system based upon self-governance by the scientific community will ultimately provide the most effective means of managing risks of misuse. We suggest that the community should take active steps to further develop mechanisms of self-governance, and that through doing so the community can ensure that responsibly conducted research is not unnecessarily obstructed.

The BBSRC, the MRC and the Wellcome Trust already have rigorous processes in place for ensuring that the research we support is of the highest scientific quality and conforms to all relevant ethical and regulatory requirements. In light of concerns over research misuse, we have been working in partnership to examine how these existing procedures could be strengthened to help ensure that risks of misuse associated with research projects are identified and assessed at the grant application stage, where it is possible to do so.

We have consulted members of funding and advisory committees across the three organisations, on the basis of a discussion document. The outcome of this has led the BBSRC, the MRC and the Wellcome Trust to agree changes to our policy statements, guidance and procedures in four areas:

- Introduction of a question on application forms asking applicants to consider risks of misuse associated with their proposal
- Explicit mention of risks of misuse in guidance to referees as an issue to consider
- Development of clear guidance for funding committees on this issue and the process for assessing cases where concerns have been raised
- Modification of organisational guidelines on good practice in research to include specific reference to risks of misuse.

The misuse of research for terrorist purposes may be only one of a number of possible ways in which the outcomes of research could conceivably result in harm. Therefore, these changes refer to all kinds of research misuse.

These changes have been introduced to heighten awareness, and as a means of identifying possible risks of misuse at an early stage. Ultimately what matters most is people's motives. The changes we are implementing to our processes will not be sufficient on their own to prevent misuse by somebody with that primary intent. Other processes within the research environment are therefore also important; these include effective research governance at the local (institutional) level, appropriate levels of caution in making appointments, and compliance with existing health and safety regulations.