



**PRESS RELEASE:  
ROYAL STATISTICAL SOCIETY LAUNCHES 'THE TROUBLE WITH RISK'  
{Embargoed until 10pm Friday 28 November 2003}**

## **THE TROUBLE WITH RISK...**

**Working in a nuclear power station; living near an overhead power line; spending an hour a week in a smoky pub. Which of these is most likely to give you cancer? Or is none of them a significant threat to health?**

Technology brings benefits - but also burdens us with an increasing number of real or imagined hazards. And evidence suggests that we are not good at judging what's risky and what isn't, and how to rate the relative importance of genuine threats.

If our distant hunting and gathering forebears were as poor at this as we are, you may wonder how our species survived to go on and develop all the potentially lethal trappings of technological civilisation. A biologist might suggest that they managed to keep going because, over the generations, evolution gradually fitted them to be good judges of the hazards they faced. But in a world of novel threats, from fast cars to fatty foods, an inherited capacity to assess the risk of forest fires or angry animals is not much use.

Statisticians are more conscious than most that misunderstanding risk can foster irrational decisions - individually and collectively. So the Royal Statistical Society has devoted the latest issue of its journal *Risk in Society* to the views of experts on smoking, transport, crime, heart disease and much else. The aim is not only to review the evidence on these topics, but to offer some ideas about how best to communicate the facts - to the public and to policy-makers.

To assist in the wider appreciation of the issues raised the Royal Statistical Society commissioned the preparation of a pamphlet, 'The Trouble with Risk', to provide a short commentary on the papers.

The President of the Royal Statistical Society, Professor Andy Grieve will be appealing to journalists to join with the Society in championing better reporting of risk in all contexts.

**The Royal Statistical Society** was founded in 1834. It is a learned and professional society, with some 7200 members based in the United Kingdom and overseas. The purpose of the Royal Statistical Society is to develop, foster and disseminate statistical knowledge, methodology and good practice for the benefit of all society.

By long tradition, therefore, from 'passionate statistician' Florence Nightingale in the 19th century to recent presidential addresses, such as *'Mad cows and ecstasy: change and choice in an evidence-based society'* by Professor Adrian FM Smith FRS, the Royal Statistical Society supports the application of scientific method and insightful analysis to improve the condition of society, and to evaluate objectively government policies.

**Risk** is all pervasive yet its estimation is difficult and its communication problematic. The Society, wishing to play a more active role in this area, has commissioned a number of papers which examine some specific kinds of risk and discuss the difficulties of communicating them. These papers were published in the June 2003 issue of *Statistics in Society* (Journal of the Royal Statistics Society – Series A) with guest editors Sir David Cox and Professor Sarah Darby.

*The communication of risk* - D. R. Cox and S. C. Darby

*Introduction to the papers on 'The communication of risk'* - A. F. M. Smith

*Human immunodeficiency virus risk: is it possible to dissuade people from having unsafe sex?*- J. Richens, J. Imrie and H. Weiss

*Communicating risk—coronary risk scores* - I. M. Graham and E. Clavel

*Tobacco—the importance of relevant information on risk* - S. C. Darby

*Tobacco: public perceptions and the role of the industry* - D. Simpson and S. Lee

*Communication of risk: health hazards from mobile phones* - D. R. Cox

*Crime victimization: its extent and communication* - P. Wiles, J. Simmons and K. Pease

*Accidental fatalities in transport* - A. W. Evans

*Communicating the risks arising from geohazards* - M. S. Rosenbaum and M. G. Culshaw

**The Trouble with Risk** pamphlet, written by Geoff Watts, has been produced in light of these papers with the aim of communicating issues surrounding risk to assist in the wider appreciation of the issues raised, presents a short commentary on those papers.

**Press conferences** are convened exceptionally by the Royal Statistical Society. In October 2003, the Society released a report on *'Performance Indicators: Good, Bad and Ugly'* reacting to and advising on the performance monitoring within the public sector. Previous reports - similarly launched - were on *'Official Statistics: Counting with Confidence'* (in 1990) and *'The Measurement of Unemployment in the UK'* (in 1995).

**Further details** of 'The Trouble with Risk' pamphlet or the activities of the Society can be obtained from the Society's offices at Errol Street or can be found on the Society's website.

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