

Remit and working methods of the Commission's Scientific Secretariat of the Permanent Senate Commission for the Investigation of Health Hazards of Chemical Compounds in the Work Area

Vital to the functioning of the Permanent Senate Commission for the Investigation of Health Hazards of Chemical Compounds in the Work Area (MAK Commission) is the support of the Commission's Scientific Secretariat, which organises and coordinates the work of the Commission. Its work includes planning and conducting the face-to-face and online meetings of the Commission's 15 working groups as well as taking care of the necessary preparation and follow-up. In addition, it coordinates dialogue between the working groups and among the members of the Commission and working groups, all of whom perform their tasks on a voluntary basis.

At the heart of the Commission's Scientific Secretariat is the Scientific Secretariat of the Commission and of the MAK Values and Classifications Working Group, which is based in Karlsruhe and in Freising-Weihenstephan. The working groups Assessment Values in Biological Material, Air Analyses, Biomonitoring, Dusts and Allergy have their own Scientific Secretariat: these are based at the research institutions at which the individual working group leaders are employed. The Scientific Secretariat has to be professionally organised and managed in order to ensure smooth functioning of the complex interaction between the various working groups of the Commission, the members of the Commission working on an interdisciplinary and voluntary basis, and the additional experts that may be required, as well as the exchange of information with other national and international statutory bodies. These tasks are performed by Dr. Gerlinde Schriever-Schwemmer and Dr. Gunnar Jahnke.

The expertise of the researchers who belong to the Commission's Scientific Secretariat reflect the various disciplines in which the Commission operates; they follow the latest developments in their specialist fields, undergo regular further training and attend research conferences. In addition to coordination and organisation work, the Commission's Scientific Secretariat is mainly involved in carrying out extensive research, preparing the texts of the substantiations and developing analytical methods. The research assistants carry out literature research, summarise their findings and the state of scientific research, present these at meetings and are responsible for preparing and following up on meetings, in particular the pre-formulating the substantiations and methods. Their tasks also include taking minutes of the discussions, incorporating these in the substantiations and analytical methods, and publishing the final outcomes. Furthermore, the Secretariats support working group members in drawing up substantiations and analytical methods. The research assistants attached to the working groups Air Analyses and Biomonitoring also support the development and validation of the methods submitted, for example by commissioning the synthesis of standards or organising and evaluating inter-laboratory tests. Methods are also developed and validated at internal laboratories, and method protocols and test reports are prepared.

In addition, conceptual papers are written on current issues relating to occupational medicine and toxicology issues or analytical subjects. The List of MAK and BAT Values and the content of the scientific justifications and the analytical methods are verified by the staff of the Commission's Scientific Secretariat after adoption by the plenary, then edited and prepared for publication in close coordination with ZB MED.

Collaboration and dialogue with statutory bodies and the public at large

Another task of the Secretariat is to support the Commission in its collaboration and dialogue with national and international bodies of experts. Such statutory bodies dealing with the analysis of chemicals from the point of view of health as well as other occupational health and safety issues include the Committee on Hazardous Substances (AGS) and its subcommittees and working groups, the Risk Assessment Committee of ECHA (RAC), the Dutch Expert Committee on Occupational Standards (Health Council of The Netherlands), the TLV and BEI Committee of the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH), the Instituto Nacional de Seguridad e Higiene en el Trabajo (INSHT) in Spain, and the organisations relevant to occupational safety and health in Austria and Switzerland. In addition, the Commission's Scientific Secretariat responds to a wide range of inquiries from the scientific community, the interested public, the authorities and the press, or else forwards such inquiries accordingly.

The non-research staff of the Secretariat support the Commission and carry out valuable work in procuring literature and compiling meeting documents, as well as carrying out general organisational tasks for meetings and supporting the Commission in publishing the results of its work. They also take care of the necessary data/information documentation and archiving.

The translation of the substantiations and analytical methods into English is also taken care of by the Secretariat in order to ensure that the specific details of the subject matter are appropriately communicated. This ensures that the work done by the Commission gains international visibility.

Quality assurance of scientific work and organisation

The decisions and substantiations adopted by the MAK Commission are subject to extremely rigorous quality standards. The subject-specific expertise of the researchers who belong to the Commission's Scientific Secretariat ensures that Commission members are involved who have expertise in the relevant subject area in relation to the issue in question and also that the discussion points are correctly reflected in the substantiations. Assessments are discussed and elaborated in the Commission's Scientific Secretariat with the involvement of several individuals. Forming part of the quality check of the documents produced, this procedure ensures that research and documentation are as complete as possible.