

Protecting the quality of life

Who or what are Public Analysts?

Public Analysts are the highly skilled scientists who form the primary scientific base of the United Kingdom's public protection enforcement service where chemical analysis and related testing are appropriate. There are some 30 Public Analysts' laboratories within Great Britain as a whole, forming an integrated and mutually supportive network with a massive technical capability to ensure that the best scientific expertise is available to local authorities for their law enforcement rôle.

Some laboratories are private practices, whilst others are local government departments - but all provide the same essential and high quality service to the community.

Although largely unknown to the public they exist to serve, Public Analysts have been in existence for nearly a century and a half, working to protect the interests of all. Originally established to ensure the safety and quality of food, their scope of work expanded over the years to include everything from the safety of toys, to the labelling of a household cleaner, to identifying the source of water draining into a basement.

Laboratories have changed beyond recognition, from the very earliest days of analytical chemistry when many of the techniques were first invented by the Public Analysts themselves to enable them to do their job, to modern sophisticated instrumentation – but their commitment to protecting the public remains unchanged.

Umbrella of Protection

The key area of a Public Analyst's work is chemical analysis, as a result of which he or she is able to determine whether a food or consumer product is likely to be harmful, the degree of contamination of a material, the quality of a product. Chemical analysis is complemented by microscopical examination, physical testing or microbiological examination as appropriate, in order to provide the Public Analyst with all the information necessary to assess the situation.

Drawing on knowledge of the law, of national and international standards, and using professional scientific judgement, the Public Analyst interprets the results of analysis or examination and prepares a report or makes recommendations on any sample submitted for testing.

The information provided by the Public Analyst may then be used by other arms of the enforcement service (such as Trading Standards or Environmental Health Departments) to ensure that the appropriate standards are maintained.

A further facility provided is assistance with the planning and design of investigations to ensure that they are conducted on a sound scientific basis.

Traders have Rights

The reputable business or trade has as much a right to protection from unscrupulous competitors as do individual members of the public.

The honest and diligent trader has nothing to fear from the activities of Public Analysts - quite the reverse. Through the Public Analyst's constant vigilance the bona fide trader can have confidence that malpractices of others have a good chance of detection, while by the use of their scientific knowledge and expertise Public Analysts seek the truth and resolve problems whenever they arise.

There have for example been many occasions when, presented with some contaminant allegedly found in food, the Public Analyst has proved that it entered the food at some time after manufacture. And in these days of potential deliberate sabotage of food or other consumer goods the Public Analyst is always available to help identify any such incident and assist in finding a solution.

Behind the Protection

Since their inception Public Analysts have been committed to the determination of appropriate standards for safety and quality, and have participated in the work of technical organisations and provided input to legislative bodies at local, national and international level.

They have a commitment to the continued development of analytical standards and methods with constant research for new or better means of ensuring the protection of the public. One recent initiative has been the formation of the Validated Enforcement Methods Service which is developing test methods appropriate to the harmonisation of European laws and ensuring that the United Kingdom has a sound base of analytical methods with international recognition.

Public Analysts are constantly aware of the need for accuracy and the potential that legal action may be taken on the basis of any analysis. Only the best available test methods are used, with appropriate quality assurance applied, and results checked and double-checked before reporting.

Under the main instrument of food law in the UK, the Food Safety Act of 1990, the Public Analyst's Certificate is acceptable in its own right as *prima facie* evidence in a Court of Law. The Public Analyst himself is always available as a skilled expert witness should it be necessary to present evidence in person or to assist the Court with the interpretation of scientific matters.

The Association of Public Analysts facilitates the co-ordination of the activities of laboratories. Training is provided both for M.Chem.A. candidates (statutory post-graduate qualification) and to ensure the continued professional competence of qualified analysts. A forum is provided within which the professional scientists in Public Analysts' laboratories can communicate and discuss matters of scientific or professional importance. The Association also provides a focus for communication with other national and international interests and acts as the voice of its members.