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Brexit must preserve advisory networks

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Faced with the compound uncertainties of Brexit, the attention of the UK science community has understandably focused on two big-ticket items: mobility and money. But there's a third "m" that will demand closer attention as the Article 50 negotiations get underway: the machinery of scientific, technical and regulatory advice. Fuelled for decades by pan-European cooperation, the smooth running of this machinery at a UK level may stutter or fail altogether in crucial areas such as clinical trials, air quality, food standards, nuclear safety and the regulation of new technologies.

Across Europe, claims that people have had "enough of experts" coexist with moves to strengthen institutions and processes for evidence-informed policymaking. Much of this effort is directed towards regulatory frameworks or technical standards – what Sheila Jasanoff memorably dubbed the "fifth branch" of government.

The UK's new Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU) has earmarked fifty-seven policy areas that will be significantly affected by Brexit. In some of these, the UK depends on EU-wide networks of expertise and regulatory oversight; in others, the relationship is one of mutual interdependence; or strengths in the UK research base have shaped frameworks across the whole of Europe.

This is all about to change. Now that the Article 50 gun has fired, the next step will be a Great Repeal Bill, which will transfer applicable EU laws and regulations – buying the UK more time to unpick any statutory knots that Brexit will create.

Decoupling structures for scientific and technical advice can, at first glance, seem deceptively simple. In many areas, UK institutions map onto EU counterparts: the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) coexists with the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA); the European Medicines Agency (EMA) with the UK Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). Why not shift responsibilities from Brussels to London and let us Brits get on with the job?

The difficulty is that UK-EU networks of expertise, guidance and oversight are complementary, and have developed in tandem over many years. Generations of British scientists and experts have shaped EU frameworks; and vice versa. Around every issue that is codified in law or regulation there exists a softer sphere of influence, information exchange and standard setting.

So in animal health, EFSA plays an important role in coordinating data and evidence about emerging livestock diseases on behalf of all EU states. The UK benefits being from being part of a network of EU reference laboratories, which coordinate surveillance, risk assessment and epidemiology on a range of transboundary diseases, such as foot-and-mouth disease and avian flu. And the FSA has drawn heavily on EFSA's meta-analyses and sophisticated protocols around risk and uncertainty.

In the life sciences, the UK's 3% share of the global pharmaceutical market is dwarfed by the EU's 25%. This brings significant benefits from regulatory harmonization through

the EMA (which – for now – has its 890 staff headquartered in London). If EMA licensing was no longer to apply in the UK, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry warns of delays of up to a year for British patients looking to access innovative treatments.

In environmental protection, a recent inquiry by the UK Environmental Audit Committee estimates that up to a third of EU legislation will be difficult to transpose into UK law. And those protections – for wildlife, habitats and biodiversity – that can be transferred through the Great Repeal Bill, will then be detached from underpinning sources of expert advice, no longer updated, with no UK body to enforce them.

Over time, the UK can build up new advisory and regulatory capacity. But this won't be quick or easy. And there are a handful of areas where the reliance on EU-wide structures is particularly acute.

The nuclear research community was alarmed by last month's unexpected announcement that Brexit would also require UK withdrawal from the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom). Among Euratom's responsibilities are ensuring nuclear safety standards and supporting non-proliferation. Through its supply agency, it also oversees the market for medical radioisotopes, such as molybdenum-99, used in radiotherapy treatments for cancer. Many scientists are now calling for the Euratom exit to be decoupled from the Brexit timetable, as its functions simply can't be replaced by 2019.

A further issue is ensuring that UK policymakers have access to the best available evidence and advice in support of the Article 50 negotiations. Here there have been calls from the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee for Whitehall's new Brexit departments to appoint chief scientific advisers. Ministers say they are considering this, but no appointments have yet been made.

It will be particularly important for the Department for International Trade to draw scientific advice into its future negotiations, to underpin consumer protection and environmental standards – and avoid any hint of a UK race to the regulatory bottom in pursuit of new markets, as advocated by the more gung-ho Brexiteers.

These changes can of course cut both ways. Regulatory gaps may become an opportunity to cut red tape. Forced withdrawal from EU expert networks may create domestic opportunities for some. In optimistic moments, some scientific leaders suggest the UK could become a testbed for more flexible approaches to new technologies and treatments – as it has with mitochondrial donation.

But for now, these questions lie a long way down the seemingly endless list of issues that need to be resolved in less than 24 months. And attention which has been paid to them is patchy, under-resourced and paralysed by the high politics that dictate the pace of the wider Brexit debate. For the sake of UK – and European – science policy, this needs to change fast.

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