

Preface

Few outside of the world of science and technology have much concept of what nanotechnology involves. It is defined in terms of products and processes involving nanometre (*i.e.* 10^{-9} or 0.000 000 001 m) dimensions but this gives no flavour for what is truly involved. What may be surprising to many is that there is a massive thrust of research and development leading to new products involving nanoscale materials and it is projected that this will be a multi-billion dollar industry within a matter of a few years. Having in the past failed to anticipate the adverse public health consequences of products such as asbestos, governments around the world are investing resource into assessing the possible adverse consequences arising from the present and future application of nanotechnologies. This led the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering in the UK to publish an expert report on the topic under the title of “Nanoscience and nanotechnologies: opportunities and uncertainties”. One manifestation of this government’s concern is that in the UK a system has been introduced by the government for the voluntary notification of products and processes using nanoscale materials.

Some nanoscale materials such as carbon black, titanium dioxide and silica have been in high tonnage production in industry for many years, with a wide range of uses. However, a vast range of other nanoscale materials are now being produced with uses as diverse as manufacturing tennis balls which retain their bounce for longer and underwear with an antimicrobial coating. The concerns over nanoparticles and nanotubes relate to the observation that they are more toxic per unit mass than the same materials in larger particle forms. Whilst the evidence for extreme toxicity of the traditionally produced nanoscale materials is lacking, there remains concern that new forms of engineered nanomaterials may prove to be appreciably toxic. There is no doubt that by virtue of their size they have a much stronger ability to penetrate into the human body than more conventionally sized materials.

This volume of Issues seeks to give a broad overview of the sources, behaviour and risks associated with nanotechnology. In the first chapter, Barry Park of Oxonica Limited, a company specialising in nanoscale products, gives an overview of the current and future applications of nanotechnology. This is followed by a discussion of nanoparticles in the aquatic and terrestrial environment by Jamie Lead of the University of Birmingham, which includes consideration of the behaviour of nanoparticles both in the aquatic environment and within soils where they can be used in remediation processes. This is followed in a third chapter by Roy Harrison with a consideration of nanoparticles within the atmosphere. Currently, this is the most important medium for human exposure, although there is very limited evidence that nanoparticles play a particularly prominent role within the overall toxicity of airborne particulate matter.

Currently, those receiving the highest exposures to nanoparticles and nanotubes are those people occupationally exposed in the industry, and in the following chapter David Mark of the Health and Safety Laboratory describes the issues of occupational exposure, including how it can be assessed and currently available data from industrial sites. The following two chapters deal respectively with the toxicological properties and human health effects of nanoparticles. In the former chapter, Ken Donaldson and Vicki Stone give a toxicological perspective on the properties of nanoparticles and consider why nanoparticle form may confer an especially high level of toxicity. This is then put into context in the following chapter by Lang Tran and co-authors, which looks for hard evidence of adverse effects upon human health both in the occupational environment and in outside air.

This volume is rounded off by a chapter by Andrew Maynard, Chief Science Adviser to the Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in the United States, which highlights the problems of regulation that are presented by a burgeoning nanotechnology industry and gives some comfort in that the problems and solutions emerging in North America do not differ greatly from those being formulated within Europe.

Overall, the volume provides a comprehensive overview of the current issues concerning engineered nanoparticles which we believe will be of immediate value to scientists, engineers and policymakers within the field, as well as to students on advanced courses wishing to look closely into this topical subject.

Ronald E. Hester
Roy M. Harrison