Accreditation of RM producers—the game moves on!

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In past columns I have considered how and in what way the organisations and companies that produce certified reference materials should be accredited. I have commented that not all CRMs offered are of equal quality, but only experience and the advice of colleagues can presently be relied upon to help users make informed buying decisions.

Two recent developments have caused me to re-visit this topic and discuss it with a number of colleagues. The first was the publication of a complete issue of *Accreditation and Quality Assurance* (Volume 8, Number 9, September 2003) dedicated to the accreditation of RM producers. The second was the announcement in October by the heads of the three leading European Reference Material Producers, BAM, IRMM and LGC, that they had signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish the new European Reference Materials (ERM) Initiative, which is designed to "harmonise and further improve" the quality, reliability and performance of chemical analysis.

That my colleague Paul de Bièvre, Editor-in Chief-of the journal, felt it sufficiently important a topic to devote a complete issue of "Acqual" to this theme is significant. His editorial, "Accreditation: painful or useful" set the tone. The papers and articles, from a range of respected practitioners, reviewed and argued the point. Reading through the full edition I was left with the clear impression that whilst a consensus is developing, there are still a number of outstanding issues. I was particularly taken by the opening statement in the conclusion of a short paper by Maree Ann Stuart[1] and colleagues at NATA, Australia. She writes "Ultimately the role of reference materials is to facilitate measurements that are traceable, reliable and comparable and which in the wider society of measurement users can have confidence."

I could not agree more. Just as in days past, where the artisan needed suitable and reliable tools to do his job, reference materials are tools of the analyst. Just as in the past they must be fit for purpose, safe and reliable. But at the moment they are not always that. This is because there are, it would seem, two camps with differing views. On one side there are those that believe that ISO 17025 is sufficient, with the presumption that the associated quality system is suitably structured, is more than sufficient. Bernd Steffen[2] argues the case in this direction, whilst Henry Steger[3] argues in favour of ISO Guide 34 and ILAC Guide G-12 as the preferred route.

It seems to me that most RM users are less interested in the way the RM producers go about Accreditation than that the producers are Accredited, and that they all do so to the same standard. We do not need dual standards. Perhaps the time is approaching when the RM producers conclude this argument and move forward with a common approach to produce the RMs the market needs. As Manfred Golze says[4] "laboratories are more hampered at present by a lack of suitable RMs than by the poor quality of available RMs".

It may be that in Europe the argument is moving to a conclusion. The new European Reference Materials (ERM) Initiative, with its clearly stated intention to "harmonise and further improve" the quality, reliability and performance of chemical analysis, has defined a way forward.

Although the main "launch" of this initiative will take place at Analytica, (Munich, Germany between 11 and 14 May, 2004) I was able to talk recently with Professor Dr Hendrik Emons, Unit Head of the Reference Materials Unit at IRMM about the ERM Initiative. First, they have a website: visit www.erm-crm.org to find out the background. But most importantly I discovered that although the initiative was started by the "big three" it welcomes new signatories: any producer of CRMs that follows ISO Guides 34 and 35 is welcome to join the initiative.

So there it is: Accreditation to ISO Guides 34 and 35 will, for the ERM, be the standard. I suspect that this decision will help move the discussion to a conclusion. It may not be the answer that everyone wants, nor will all agree, but it is a standard.

I understand that more than 30, possibly 50 new ERMs are expected to be unveiled at the launch. As other RM producers look at the new playing field and join the numbers of RM producers who wish to be part of the ERM will surely increase.

At last Europe will have an agreed standard for RM production and certification that is clear and unambiguous.

Will the market accept this? Only time will tell! But in the meantime I urge all interested in this topic to get hold of the September edition of "*Accred. Qual. Assur.*" and read it, from cover to cover!

References

1. M.A. Stuart, "Accreditation of RM producers, An Australian perspective", *Accred. Qual. Assur.* **8,** 405–407 (2003).
2. B. Steffen, "Stand alone accreditation of RM producers, arguments against it", *Accred. Qual. Assur.* **8,** 422–424 (2003).
3. H.F. Steger, "Accreditation of RM Producers: lets get it right!", *Accred. Qual. Assur.* **8,** 415–420 (2003).
4. M. Golze, "The accreditation of RM producers: Eurolab's position", *Accred. Qual. Assur.* **8,** 420–422 (2003).