

“UNSPINNING” EPIDEMIOLOGICAL RESULTS FOR POLICY MAKERS

Neutra, Raymond, *Neutra Consultancy, USA*

Background and Aims: Environmental health policy decisions are partially influenced by: 1) the strength of evidence for, and 2) the magnitude of an environmental risk. However, the epidemiological literature is rife with adjectives pertaining to these two features, that play on well-known psychological quirks, in order to either alarm or reassure policy makers and the public.

Through a publicly vetted process in California we developed a vocabulary to minimize this kind of “spinning” of results. **Methods:** Staff of the California Department of Public Health developed “Risk Evaluation Guidelines” that laid out a proposed vocabulary for characterizing evidence and the magnitude of risk. These guidelines were submitted for public comment as well as review by an external advisory committee of scientists from various disciplines. After revision and acceptance by the committee these terms were used in a risk evaluation of low frequency magnetic fields (EMF).

Results: We avoided the common locution: “there is no evidence that...” Instead, we proposed terms to characterize the volume, the quality, and the consistency of the “evidentiary base” as well as the magnitude and the direction of observed effects. We reported estimated magnitudes of effects in both their psychologically reassuring and alarming formats. We were also careful to report facts relevant to “fairness” such as the existence of unequal exposures or the existence of effect modification in disadvantaged groups.

Conclusions: These detailed specifications for vocabulary can be found in the “Risk Evaluation Guidelines” and their actual use can be found in the “Risk Evaluation.” Both of these documents received public review before finalization. They can be found on-line at the reference below. Stakeholders on both sides of the EMF issue considered these documents to have avoided “spinning.” This vocabulary deserves wider use.

References:

www.ehib.org/emf