Nancy Wertheimer, Who Linked Magnetic Fields to Childhood Leukemia, Dies

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Nancy Wertheimer, who more than any other epidemiologist was responsible for identifying the association between magnetic fields and childhood leukemia, died at the age of 80 on Christmas day. The cause was complications following hip replacement surgery, according to Ed Leeper, her life partner and long-time collaborator.

In 1979, Wertheimer and Leeper reported that children living near high-current electrical wiring had a higher than expected rate of leukemia. At the time, the association was seen as a curiosity and was largely discounted and ignored. That all changed in 1988, when a study sponsored by the New York State Department of Health supported their hypothesis. Later work confirmed the link and extended it to measured power-frequency magnetic fields.

"Nancy was a real pioneer," said David Carpenter, the director of the Institute for Health and the Environment at the University of Albany, NY. In the 1980's, Carpenter ran the health department's New York Power Line Project. Wertheimer and Leeper's final vindication came in 2001 when the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified power-frequency magnetic fields as a possible human carcinogen on the basis of a large body of epidemiological evidence, all stemming from Wertheimer and Leeper's 1979 landmark paper. "It is rare that a scientist opens a whole field of research, which is what Nancy Wertheimer did," Carpenter told *Microwave News*.

In her later years Wertheimer moved on to other projects. "She felt it was time for younger people to work out what it all really means, including understanding the biophysical mechanism," Leeper said. "Nancy always said that the risks we had found are small but that we may not have identified the real risks, which could, under certain circumstances, be larger, or that we may not be looking at the right end points." That is, we still don't understand what types of fields are responsible and what are they doing.

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2024 Articles
2023 Articles
2022 Articles
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2020 Articles
2019 Articles
2018 Articles
2017 Articles
2016 Articles
2015 Articles
2014 Articles
2013 Articles
2012 Articles
2011 Articles
2010 Articles
2009 Articles
2008 Articles
2007 Articles
2006 Articles
2005 Articles
2004 Articles

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"Nancy was fascinated by how the body reacts to magnetic fields," Leeper said. "She was a scientist not a public health advocate. People tried to portray her as a dedicated reformer, but that was not her style." Once we uncover the biophysical mechanism —the part of the EMF puzzle that remains unresolved— Wertheimer believed that new applications could be devised, Leeper said, and that medical benefits might follow.

Nancy Wertheimer, Ed Leeper, David Carpenter,

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