Lerchl's Unattainable Prize: The IARC RF Panel

A Chance To Vote on RF–Cancer Link But Disqualified for Having Ties to Industry

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Alexander Lerchl wanted a seat at the table and wanted it bad. It was 2010 and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) was setting up a working group to assess the cancer risks of RF radiation. The meeting would be a landmark event with major long-term implications for the cell phone industry.

As it turned out, in May 2011, the working group voted, by a large margin, to classify RF, including cell phone radiation, as a possible human carcinogen. But that outcome was far from assured before its 30 members —from 14 countries— deliberated for eight days at IARC headquarters in Lyon, France.*

Lerchl, a professor at Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany, was making a name for himself as a self-appointed debunker of claims of radiation health effects. (His actions would later backfire and lead to his censure.) Lerchl craved to be invited to Lyon, but IARC would not have him. His ties to the telecom industry disqualified him, the cancer agency decided. IARC didn't trust Lerchl to be fair and impartial.

"I am pretty upset," Lerchl told a colleague at the time. He would remain upset for years to come.

A year earlier, in 2009, Lerchl had turned 50 and was on a roll. He was appointed chairman of the Non-Ionizing Radiation Committee of the German Commission on Radiological Protection (SSK for short). The SSK advises the Federal Office for Radiation Protection (BfS), the focal point for the government's work on RF safety. Lerchl had become the most senior RF advisor in Germany.

He was also negotiating with the BfS for a contract to investigate the cancer risk of 3G radiation. He would soon be awarded €458,000 (US$600,000) for a three-year study. It would be his sixth

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BfS-sponsored animal study since 2000. (A table of Lerchl's BfS grants is here.)

IARC was Lerchl's chance to step onto the international stage. If selected, his standing within German academia would get a boost as well. Lerchl was —and still is— a professor of biology at Jacobs University, a private institution which is not in the top tier. Named after a family of coffee merchants, Jacobs is sometimes called the "coffee university." The IARC panel would include professors from some of the world's leading institutions and Lerchl would profit from being in their company.

Lerchl Nominates Himself; IARC Says No

Lerchl notified IARC that he wanted to be a member of the working group and submitted the necessary paperwork including a CV and details of potential conflicts of interest (COIs). Most don't apply; they are selected by IARC.

On August 27, 2010, the Agency told him he had not made the cut. Lerchl refused to accept the decision. He wanted to know why. A few days later, IARC explained that it was because he was a "consultant" to industry, specifically the German Information Center for Mobile Communications, known as IZMF, short for Informationszentrum Mobilfunk.† IARC wrote:

> "We have become aware of the fact that this organization has been set-up and is maintained by the mobile-phone networks in Germany to defend the joint interests of the German mobile-phone industry. As such, this activity poses in our view at least an apparent conflict."

Diagnose:Funk, a German-Swiss environmental and consumer protection group, has called the IZMF "a propaganda center for all mobile operators."

As is his wont to never concede defeat, Lerchl appealed again. He was not an IZMF consultant, he replied. Rather, he stated, he was "an independent expert for their educational program." Lerchl went on to imply that any claim that he had conflicts would cast a shadow on the BfS, where he was held in high regard.

IARC backed off on calling out his industry ties, but continued to refuse to put him on the RF working group. On October 26, 2010, IARC wrote to Lerchl:

> "[A]bout half of your recent publications on RF radiation are not original research papers but criticisms of studies that suggest a harmful effect of exposure to radiation emitted by mobile telephones. … [W]e feel that your participation would not contribute to a balanced search for consensus within the forthcoming Working Group. … [O]ur final decision remains unchanged."

IARC was taking potential conflicts seriously —and not just with respect to Lerchl.§ Right before the RF working group assembled in Lyon on May 24, 2011, the Agency dropped Anders Ahlbom of Sweden's Karolinska Institute from the panel on learning that he was a director of his brother's consulting firm, which had telecoms

as clients. Ahlbom had not cited this in his declaration of interests (more here). IARC allowed Ahlbom to attend the meeting as an invited specialist. He declined.

Another Skirmish with Robert Baan

It didn't help Lerchl's case that IARC's gatekeeper for the RF panel and the cosigner of the October 26 letter was Robert Baan. At the time, Baan was also serving as the European editor of *Mutation Research.* Vincent Cogliano, then head of IARC's Monograph Section and formerly a senior manager at the U.S. EPA, cosigned the letter.

Three years back, Baan and Lerchl had butted heads when Lerchl had demanded that *Mutation Research* retract a 2005 paper on RF-induced DNA breaks by Hugo Rüdiger's group at the Medical University of Vienna (much more about the Vienna Affair here). There was no love lost between Baan and Lerchl.

After investigating Lerchl's charges, Baan sided with Rüdiger and refused to withdraw the paper. Lerchl, outraged, filed a complaint with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), a watchdog group based in London. He got no satisfaction. The Rüdiger paper remains in the scientific literature.

The dispute made an indelible impression on Baan. "With time, one sometimes feels regret about gaps in one's memory of certain events; the 'Lerchl Affair' is certainly not one of them," he told me not long ago.

Diagnose:Funk Cites Industry Ties; Lerchl Sues

Lerchl's ties with industry came up again three years later. On August 22, 2013, *Die Zeit*, a highly regarded newsweekly, ran a feature story titled, "The Invisible Enemy," on RF health risk. The article portrayed Lerchl as a "combative radiation biologist" and a crusader against sloppy science unafraid to go to the "barricades" against those who claim that cell phone radiation causes cancer. With respect to his financial support from industry, Lerchl said that he had received only €5,000 over the previous three years and that this was for "training sessions."

Diagnose:Funk was incredulous. It issued a statement disputing *Die Zeit's* characterization of Lerchl and declared that he is "neither independent nor critical, but rather a representative of the federal government and industry, who was rewarded with high positions and a lot of research grants." That's why IARC rejected him from the RF working group, Diagnose:Funk stated.

Within a week, Lerchl had a temporary injunction barring Diagnose:Funk from distributing the statement. Peter Hensinger, now Diagnose:Funk's vice chairman, points out that the injunction carried a €250,000 fine for anyone found distributing the statement until the court had ruled on the merits. (Ironically, Lerchl would later be threatened with the same €250,000 fine if he did not stop smearing the Rüdiger DNA research.)

A settlement was reached about a month later, based largely on IARC's October 26, 2010, letter. Under the agreement, Diagnose:Funk could resume saying that Lerchl had been rejected by IARC, but could no longer attribute that decision to his ties to industry.

Lerchl has claimed that he "refrained" from taking money from industry. Yet, at the same time, he acknowledged receiving grants from the German Research Association for Radio Applications, an industry consortium known as the FGF.

Making sense of his logic is not easy. It's no different from, say, 'I don't take money from cigarette companies, only from the Council for Tobacco Research.' In each case, FGF and CTR, corporate money passed through an industry-funded entity. It's still industry money.

Diagnose:Funk's charges about Lerchl's rewards of "high positions" and "research grants" referred as much to the BfS as to industry. A provision in the settlement barred the group from saying that Lerchl's €458,000 grant from the BfS in 2011 was a 'thank you' from the government for denying links between cell phones and cancer. (Over the last 20 years, Lerchl has received $5 million in research grants from the BfS.)

Baan: Reason Was His Links to Industry

There was never much doubt that IARC had rejected Lerchl based on his COIs —and that Diagnose:Funk had been right all along— only that IARC had hesitated to say this publicly, most likely in deference to the BfS.

On October 5, 2011, a few months after the working group meeting, Baan sent a private message to a number of his colleagues at Elsevier, the publisher of *Mutation Research.* Here's how Baan explained the decision to exclude Lerchl:

> "Dr. Lerchl has connections with the German mobile-phone industry and with network providers. This was a reason for us not to allow him to participate in the recent IARC meeting as a member of the Working Group."

Masquerading as "Don Smith"?

There's one last chapter to this story. On May 19, 2015, four years after the IARC RF review and after both Baan and Cogliano had left the agency, IARC received an e-mail from an individual who, wanting to stay anonymous, called himself, "Don Smith." (*Microwave News* and *Retraction Watch,* a news service that follows the world of bad science, were copied on the message.)

Smith wanted IARC to investigate what he called undisclosed conflicts of interest within the RF working group. A list of more than 30 participants followed, each with a list of potential COIs.

Three months later, Baan issued a "Correction" in *Lancet Oncology,* updating just one of the 30 COIs. (Baan had published a summary of the RF working group decision there in July 2011.) It was Niels

Kuster's, the head of the IT'IS Foundation in Zurich.‡ Kuster had attended the IARC meeting as an "invited specialist," rather than as a member of the working group.

Retraction Watch ran a short news item about the correction in *Lancet Oncology.* There is only one comment below the story. It was from Lerchl:

> "Very interesting indeed to see this happening four years after IARC had classified radiofrequency electromagnetic fields from mobile phones as "possibly carcinogenic" (2B). To find a researcher with such a long list of collaborators from industry, on one hand, and a profound interest in exposure research, on the other, as [a] member of the group of experts is irritating, to say the least. Not to mention his role as coauthor [of an *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*] paper from 2008 which is subject to an Expression of Concern."

Five years had passed since IARC denied Lerchl membership on the RF–cancer working group, and the rejection still grated. Over the next four years, the BfS would give him more than a million euros for research on cell phone radiation.

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* The 421-page report of the IARC RF working group can be downloaded here. It includes a roster of the panel members, invited specialists and observers. *Microwave News* ran a blog on the meeting, from May 23 through the '2B' decision on May 31: "IARC, the RF–Cancer Review & the Ahlbom Affair." Two members of the working group, Meike Mevissen and Chris Portier, later published an "inside view" of the meeting, under the title, "The Eyes of the World Were Upon Us."

† The company that ran the IZMF website closed down at the end of 2015. The website itself continues with the support of large telecom companies, including Telekom Deutschland, Telefónica Germany and Vodafone.

§ IARC did invite three cell phone trade groups —CTIA, MMF and GSMA— to attend the meeting as observers. The press, including *Microwave News,* was not allowed in.

‡ Lerchl had been feuding with Kuster for years. Kuster is a coauthor of one of Rüdiger's DNA papers —one that Lerchl had been demanding that Kuster retract since it had been published seven years earlier. In early 2020, Lerchl was still hounding Kuster to retract the paper. More here.

For more on Lerchl and the Vienna Affair:
German Court Moves To Silence Relentless Critic of RF DNA Studies
and
Rich Rewards for Bad Behavior

This story is a chapter of a planned book on the links between electromagnetic radiation and cancer and the failed search for answers. I am releasing this bit of history now because of its obvious relevance to the recent court decision ordering Lerchl to stop his mischief.

Alexander Lerchl, IARC, RF, Mutation Research, Robert Baan, Vincent Cogliano, Niels Kuster, IT'IS, Anders Ahlbom, Diagnose:Funk,

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