Beyond Risk and Reason

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Assessing health risks is a tricky business. Teaching others how to do it is no easier. To see this, you need to look no further than a recent report from the Geneva-based International Risk Governance Council (IRGC), a self-described "independent" group run by a group of government, industry and academic leaders. The title of the report is a mouthful: *Risk Governance Deficits: An Analysis and Illustration of the Most Common Deficits in Risk Governance*. A better title would have been, *Common Pitfalls in Risk Analysis,* or perhaps, *Risk: A Guide to Better Decision Making.*

The handbook runs 91 pages with case studies on hot-button issues, including genetically modified food, mad cow disease and EMFs. It offers some sensible recommendations, such as: Don't provide biased, selective or incomplete information about potential risks, especially from stakeholders who may seek to advance their own interests (pp.22-23). Just about everybody would agree with that advice, but when the report turns to EMFs, forget about it. Once again, the basic rules governing conflicts of interest don't apply to EMFs.

Here's the summary of the EMF case study reprinted in the IRGC report:

> We conclude that risk management of EMFs has certainly not been perfect, but for power-frequency EMFs risk management has evolved and can be largely considered a success. Lessons from the power-frequency experience can benefit risk governance of radiofrequency EMFs and other emerging technologies. (p.68)

A success? Hardly. The only EMF success stories over the last 30 years tell how the electric utility and cell phone industries have prevailed —largely by suppressing research and marginalizing the health issue. We have made very little progress understanding what power-line or cell phone EMFs do to us over the last 25 years, and that owes a lot to the success of their game plan.

The case study itself paints an even rosier picture:

> The main lesson to be learned from power-frequency experience is that an open and proactive approach to research allowed for a successful management of a potentially volatile issue that could have had tremendous societal costs. While some uncertainty remains, it is widely accepted that the health effect, even if real, is not of major public health significance.

If this reads like industry propaganda, that's because it is. The case study was written by two long-time operatives of the electric utility industry: Leeka Kheifets and John Swanson (together with Shaiela Kandel, an Israeli associate). Anyone with even the most rudimentary knowledge of the EMF health issue would be aware that Kheifets has been associated with EPRI for most of her professional career and that Swanson is an employee of the National Grid, one of the world's largest electric utilities. Clearly, they are "stakeholders" of the utility industry and IRGC should have asked a more neutral party to write the EMF case study, if it had operated under its own rules. (For more on Kheifets and Swanson's activities, see "The Real Junk Science of EMFs.")

If those who teach us the rules of conduct can violate them with such ease, what hope can there be for evenhanded risk assessment?

One of the four principal authors of the IRGC report is John Graham, who is himself a controversial figure in the risk business. He was the founder of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, whose corporate sponsors read like a roster of the S&P500. More surprising is that the chair of the IRGC's Scientific and Technical Council is Granger Morgan of Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). Morgan was a coauthor of an influential EMF report back in 1989—the first to introduce the concept of precaution for EMF health risks; they called it "prudent avoidance." (One lesser known fact: Morgan was Graham's thesis advisor at CMU.) Graham is no stranger to EMFs either. He provided cover for George Carlo's research project for the cell phone industry. Carlo paid Graham's Center for Risk Analysis over $400,000 to help him camouflage the fact that Carlo's enterprise, known as WTR, was a scam, whose primary objective was to *avoid* doing health research.

Swiss Re, a large reinsurance company, was a sponsor of the IRGC report. Some 15 years ago, Swiss Re issued its own report on EMFs, *Electrosmog A Phantom Risk,* which warned that the EMF problem could "threaten [the insurance industry's] very existence" (see *MWN,* J/A97, p.8). That won't happen as long it's so easy to break the most basic rules of risk and reason.

EMFs, IRGC, EPRI, Leeka Kheifets, John Swanson, Shaiela Kandel, John Graham, Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, George Carlo, Granger Morgan,

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