



JULY 26, 2007

ORDINARY PEOPLE STILL TRUST WHO ON HEALTH MATTERS, SAYS FORMER EMF CHIEF

INTERNATIONAL

Key words: RF, WHO, research agenda, bias, IEI, EHS

Madison, Wisconsin---The RF Gateway recently interviewed Dr. Mike Repacholi, retired chief of the International EMF Project at the WHO about the goals, methods, and accomplishments of the EMF Project and his own qualifications and motivations in leading it from 1996 to 2006. Repacholi suggested the need to “set the record straight” because some anti-EMF activist groups launched bitter attacks against the WHO EMF Project and his own personal integrity as its leader. He also reflects on the EMF issue in general. Below is an edited synopsis. The entire 5.5-page interview, which is not under copyright restrictions, is available from the Gateway (rfgateway@rs-inc.com).

RF Gateway: There has been criticism that some studies that show an EMF health effect were suppressed by WHO or otherwise “discredited.”

MR: Honestly, it is in no one’s interest to leave out or discredit studies showing a positive effect. The only criteria for weighting a study are whether its results can be reproduced and/or the quality of methodology. The EMF Project has specifically recommended further research in areas where individual studies have produced results that needed confirmation. In this case I can point to my own animal study on PIM1 transgenic mice. Before it could be accepted into the database for health risk assessment it had to be confirmed in similar studies. As it turned out, it was not replicated. No one study can be used for health risk assessments; the weight of evidence approach used by WHO has been shown to prove its value over the past 50 or so years.

RF Gateway: A handful of vocal activist groups have occasionally charged that WHO makes its EMF recommendations for the convenience of industry. They sometimes attack you personally. How do you respond?

MR: Activists have attacked WHO and me almost since the EMF Project began; it is a very sensitive issue to many people. Many WHO staff members managing other sensitive health programs have also been attacked in a similar way, so this is not a new phenomenon. Some activists feel passionate about their stance and don’t like it when the science does not agree with them. Since they do not have the scientific ability to debate the science they resort to personal attacks or say WHO is in the pocket of industry, or both. Throughout my time at WHO I can say unreservedly that all decisions were based on the science by committees of experts. Attacking WHO or me is like shooting the messenger; it does not alter the facts.

The EMF project did engage with some activist groups, especially for the work on the use of precautionary approaches. These groups were given many of the initial drafts for review. Some success was gained by this engagement, but I found that when activist groups engaged with WHO they were later spurned by other activist groups. During my term of office, I wanted to engage reasonable activist groups, and we tried, but my impression now is that, overall, activists are not really interested in the science; unfortunately many are there just to make names for themselves.

RF Gateway: Specifically, Serge Sargentini of Next-up, with Jean-Luc Guilmot of Belgium’s Teslabel

have claimed it's a "medical scandal" that WHO has not done more to protect people with EMF hypersensitivity.

MR: The EMF Project spent many years trying to understand EHS. To assess all the facts, WHO held a special workshop in Prague to have world scientists, treating physicians and activists give presentations and discuss all aspects of EHS. The science was overwhelming, that EMF was not the cause of EHS. However, there is a strong belief among some EHS individuals that their symptoms were due to EMF exposure and they would not have their minds changed by any facts. All EMF Project assessments, results and conclusions were, and continue to be in agreement with all other national and international peer-review committees assessing the same EMF topics.

RF Gateway: Activists have recently pointed to a study by Andrew Oxman of the Norwegian Knowledge Center for the Health Services and others in *The Lancet* as evidence that WHO has not made full and appropriate use of its own rules and recommendations for developing "evidence-based" health guidelines. Would you care to comment on Oxman et al.'s findings in relation to the WHO International EMF Project?

MR: It is indeed unfortunate that some WHO programs are under extreme pressure to come up with conclusions when there is insufficient evidence. In some WHO programs, conclusions have to be made on only a few papers; however, over 6000 papers exist in the scientific literature on EMF. This number makes it the second-most studied agent in the world after ionizing radiation. While there is still research needed in certain key areas, the EMF Project has only published its recommendations and conclusions in those areas where sufficient knowledge exist. The Oxman et al. findings do not apply to all WHO programs and certainly not to the EMF Project.

RF Gateway: Do you think the ordinary person trusts WHO recommendations as much today as they did in the past? Is there an adjustment to be made by WHO or ICNIRP to a new reality for public health policy?

MR: While there seems to have been a general decline in trust and respect for authority and scientific opinion over time by ordinary people, this may be because open (media-publicized) scientific debates on issues are more common. People generally want to know whether something is safe or not (a black or white answer); they are less interested when scientists hedge their bets and offer shades of grey, which is typical for scientists who admit they don't know everything.

There may have been a reduced trust in WHO by activists, but I don't believe this is the case for ordinary people. From what I hear, WHO is still the most highly respected health agency in the world; WHO recommendations save millions of lives every year and are relied upon heavily. Most countries automatically incorporate WHO advice into their own policies. In the case of EMF, some countries may take a more cautious approach due to pressure from their citizens. WHO provides advice from which sound national policies can be developed.

I don't believe that ICNIRP or the EMF Project need to make much of an adjustment with respect to public trust. Neither organization is influenced by industry, regardless of what anyone says. Further, they have embraced a policy of openness (open meetings to allow inputs from all segments of society) and transparency in their decision-making. Excellent criteria for decision-making have been developed and, when used, should lead to the same conclusions by anyone. Certainly both organizations should be mindful not to erode trust.

RF Gateway: How can perceived conflict of interest be avoided as long as industry remains the largest funding source for EMF research?

MR: Before I retired from WHO, we conducted an analysis of funding for the EMF Project. It indicated that industry was providing less than half of the resources. Further, when industry funding was involved, it was in a manner that no influence could be brought to bear on any decisions of the Project. It is not possible for WHO staff to influence results; they can only publish the results of these workshops and

committees. Further, it was felt at the commencement of the Project that industry was creating the health concern with its EMF devices and so we believed they contribute funds to a project whose aim was to obtain better information on health risks. Again, WHO used the same principle that has been used by many national authorities, where industry contributed to research programs that were then managed by independent agencies or committees who ensure industry cannot influence the work. Everyone can be assured that WHO is well above any outside influence; it would not be worth spoiling its substantial reputation.

REPORTED BY: Janet Lathrop, Susan Tikalsky, and Sara Wolfgram, RF Gateway, tikalsky@rs-inc.com