Attack of the Radio Waves: The EMF Scares Continue

By ACSH Staff — June 20, 2005

Meet the D'Souza family of Sacramento.

The D'Souzas live in a pleasant ranch house on a pretty cul-de-sac in Natomas. Well, it used to be pleasant, until they started bolting up hideous layers of corrugated sheet metal all over the house. The D'Souzas say the metal is there to protect them from, to quote media reports, "unknown neighbors who have been bombarding them with radio waves and making them sick."

Ah. Radio waves. Unknown neighbors.

One news report helpfully notes that the D'Souza daughters are "both college educated," as if that could lend some credibility to their malign fantasy. The family claims the attacks began on the first anniversary of September 11, possibly due to their Pakistani ancestry. To compound the troubles of the seemingly unbalanced clan, Sacramento code enforcement has declared that the fortress they've made of their home is an eyesore and the sheet metal has to come down.

But before we laugh at the D'Souzas and their tinfoil hats, perhaps a little compassion is in order. In truth, they really are victims, victims of a technophobic popular culture all too willing to believe every environmental health horror story plucked off the grapevine or ground out of the rumor mill. Are they so different from average citizens?

Remember how, since 1979, everyone's been looking askance at power lines? That was the year a questionable report seemed to indicate electromagnetic field radiation increased children's chances of getting leukemia. The study involved samplings that were dangerously small for legitimate research and relied heavily on inference instead of actual measurement. No matter. It was about radiation. That was all that mattered to millions following the news and learning to fear technology.

The obsession with power lines persists in popular culture to this day even though a much more detailed, thorough, and scholarly study released in 1997 found no connection between power lines and childhood leukemia.

The flames of irrational fear were stoked further by another hyperbolic study in 1992. In that episode, a scientist at the Lawrence Berkely Laboratory claimed his data showed that anything that emits an electromagnetic field can cause cancer. This would include cell phones, stereos, toasters, electric blankets, and even the wiring in a home.

But this report was more than just badly done. It was downright false.

A 1995 analysis of the data in that study revealed key parts of it were falsified. That belated
injection of inconvenient facts into the issue mattered not. The zeitgeist said: "Danger! Danger! Your clock radio will kill you!"

Just as sensationalist journalists pursue the most lurid tales of freakish behavior or bloodshed, some researchers willfully subvert science to achieve a headline-grabbing statistic, preferably with the most terrifying number possible. By establishing a dire threat, these mercenaries can attract funding for still more research.

At the other end of the equation are poor duped citizens like the D'Souzas. All these unfortunates know is that at one point they heard that electromagnetic radiation will kill you. Somewhere along the line, that fear was mixed in with the notion that "They" are out to get you because you're Pakistanis and soon your metal-clad emotional problems are on the evening news.

Plenty of preposterous urban myths float around arousing anxiety, particularly in those already prone to instability, often long after respectable scientists have stopped paying attention to the myths, regarding them as definitively refuted.

I am reminded of Gen. Jack D. Ripper in Doctor Strangelove, the character who starts World War III out of the fear that fluoridation is a communist plot to make him impotent. While real-world delusions may not have caused quite that much destruction, they've burdened America's economy to the tune of billions of dollars. That's the kind of money being wasted, for instance, on "mitigation" efforts to protect people from the threat of harm from electromagnetic radiation, a threat for which there is currently no evidence.

As far back as 1994, Congress's General Accounting Office estimated the needless expenditures on electromagnetic field protections had already surpassed $1 billion. Power companies, municipalities, and school systems spend millions rerouting cables, installing shielding, or burying power lines. Rather than confront the public with facts, and rather than risk jackpot awards in frivolous lawsuits, utilities often just roll over and squander money on expensive measures unsupported by science.

Why not? It's ultimately the ratepayers' money.

And so a delusion is accommodated instead of confronted, and it continues to fester, gaining strength and occasionally erupting in truly bonkers manifestations like the freak show in Sacramento.

Looks like General Ripper wasn't impotent after all. He can count the D'Souzas among his progeny.

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Editor's note: The Environmental Working Group, who helped bring us the toxic salmon scare, may not be starting World War III, but they have indeed jumped on the anti-fluoride bandwagon, as the London Observer reports, promoting a study suggesting fluoride causes bone cancer.
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