Power Lines and Cancer: another unfounded scare that persists

By ACSH Staff — December 3, 2014

A New York Times article addresses the persistent devil that is fear, using as an example a recent video documentary from Retro Report. The new documentary examines media coverage of possible links between power lines and leukemia in the 1980s and 1990s that sparked fears of a cancer epidemic.

The widespread fear of a power line/cancer correlation began in the 1980s, as reports of cancer outbreaks in children whose families lived near high-voltage power lines caused panic in parents across the country. And those fears were inflated when an epidemiologist named Dr. David Savitz suggested that children who live near power lines were twice as likely to develop cancer than children who did not.

Since then, scientists continued to examine the issue and could not find any major link between power lines and childhood leukemia. The National Research Council reported in 1996 that it had found no persuasive evidence that power lines presented a threat. Dr. Savitz even recanted his original assertion. He stated his reasoning for doing so: It really isn’t a question of what one study or another says, but rather what the body of literature as a whole says. However, worried parents across the country still continue to protest installation of new power lines, despite what the science says. They’re worried about the health and wellbeing of their children, and this fear often trumps logic and scientific evidence.

Exchange power lines for GMOs, vaccines, or any of the baseless scares prevalent today, and you’ll find it’s still the same old story playing out: once fear is sparked, people let emotion guide their decisions, despite what science overwhelmingly argues. And the astounding benefits these inventions provide to society are often overlooked due to the chance they might cause an almost non-existent risk.

David Ropeik, who has written broadly on risk perception and was interviewed for the Retro Report documentary, aptly concludes, We have to recognize that there are very real risks out there |but one of them is fear.