

What's Ailing IARC? Another Round of Criticism Ensues



By Hank Campbell — April 18, 2016

International Agency Research on Cancer



The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), which is

the epidemiological arm of the United Nations, has been in existence since the 1960s but it only recently got a skeptical look from journalists and the general public -- because officials declared that sausage is the same risk as cigarette smoking, plutonium, mustard gas and asbestos.

That doesn't pass the smell test. Obviously those things are riskier than an Oscar Mayer bologna sandwich.

The agency had long been criticized by neutral members of the science community, who knew IARC committees recently were hand-picked based on bizarre criteria; they don't want you to have consulted for business, for example. Who gets hired to consult for business? The scholars who are the best at their jobs. So if you take out the most successful, you are left with a small circle of academics who, it turns out, have their names on a lot of the papers that end up in reviews and meta-analyses done by IARC, with the promise that they aren't biased.

In *Reuters* ^[1], IARC is under fire again. Journalist Kate Kelland spoke to American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) Scientific Advisor Dr. Geoffrey Kabat, cancer epidemiologist at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and author of "Hyping Health Risks" and in true ACSH 'separate the health threat from the health scares' fashion, Kabat told Kelland, "What the public wants to know is: What are the agents in our surroundings that are likely to have palpable effects on our health? Not theoretical exposures which might, under some far-fetched conditions, possibly have an effect."

IARC has been scrambling to blame the media for conflating "hazard" and "risk" while ignoring the fact that they use "risk" all over their documents even though that is not its mandate. In the monograph that finally brought some light on how IARC creates findings, officials were overt about it and gave specific warnings about the *risk* of eating red and processed meat, even though insiders who observed the talks can't figure out where it was in the data. Then they blamed media for saying what they put in the document.

She even got Kurt Straif, the head of IARC's classification program, to double down on the claim that sausage is just as dangerous as plutonium.

Yet everyone knows it isn't.

The problem Kelland digs up is what ACSH has said for decades: The scholars chosen for IARC committees can review their own research or that of their friends, and they expect us to trust that they will be impartial, all the while insisting that scholars who work for corporations or consult for corporations can't be. It's hypocrisy.

[In the Wall Street Journal in 2014](#) [2], I exposed *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* for letting contributors hand-pick their reviewers, including their personal friends in the Academy. One of the times [they allowed a study to be hand-walked past peer review](#) [3] it implicated a pesticide as an endocrine disruptor, Natural Resources Defense Council issued a press release, *New York Times* dutifully rewrote it, and the government made the EPA call a special panel to analyze the chemical again. Numerous years, and a lot of wasted taxpayer money, later the product was cleared, and the EPA wasn't even able to use the original study that got the controversy started, because it contained no data and the author refused to show it to anyone.

Real peer review would have caught that. Six weeks after my article made waves nationwide, [PNAS revised their policy on member involvement and being hand-picked by friends](#) [4], and they were right to do so. Most scholars are honest but if they wrote epidemiology papers finding processed meat or a pesticide to be a carcinogen, of course they are going to think the work is credible in a meta-analysis.

Bob Tarone, Biostatistics Director at the International Epidemiology Institute, told Kelland, "It's absurd to assert there are no issues of bias related to self-interest, reputation or careerism" -- especially when scientists are not immune from criticism in any other area where the 'like effect' is in play, such as racism or sexism in the halls of academia.

And it's absurd to think excluding a giant pool of the science community from participation won't impact the results: No reasonable body could have found that cell phones cause cancer, yet IARC did.

At this point, the IARC committees are essentially just drafting up new fundraising brochures for Union of Concerned Scientists, NRDC, and all of the other anti-science groups that promote fear and doubt about the modern world.

Yet at least Monsanto has to be pretty happy with that last monograph. [The company now gets to say the pesticide glyphosate is far safer to eat than a hot dog](#) [5].

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http://www.science20.com/science_20/sexist_weather_and_hermaphroditic_frogs_the_problem_of_faux_peer_review-140470

[3] <http://www.pnas.org/content/99/8/5476.full.pdf>

[4] <http://blogs.nature.com/news/2014/10/pnas-narrows-pathway-to-publication.html?source=acsh.org>

[5] <http://acsh.org/news/2015/03/23/iarcs-ruling-on-glyphosate-ignores-the-science/>