

Independence of experts on the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR)

See enclosed question on the Independence of experts on the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR) and answer from the Commission.

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Question from the Danish EU-MEP Schaldemose

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=WQ&reference=P-2009-1843&language=EN>

Parliamentary questions

18 March 2009 P-1843/09

WRITTEN QUESTION by Christel Schaldemose (PSE) to the Commission

Subject: Independence of experts on the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR)

Answer(s)

The International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP), which is responsible for establishing the international limit values for electromagnetic radiation, which apply throughout much of the EU, has been criticised both by researchers and organisations for setting those limits too high to the advantage of the telecommunications industry and the military sector.

Nevertheless, the majority of the newly established EU group of experts, the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR), consists of individuals with a background in the ICNIRP who were therefore involved in establishing the limit values which they have subsequently been asked to evaluate.

Does the Commission consider that these experts, who were involved in establishing the limit values for radiation, can be regarded as impartial and independent?

Does the Commission acknowledge that a lowering of the limit values for electromagnetic radiation would entail a major financial burden for European telecommunications companies?

Does the Commission agree that there is an acute conflict of interests involved in being or having been a member of the ICNIRP and participation in the work of the SCENIHR?

What measures will the Commission take to find a better balance between critical and uncritical researchers on the ICNIRP?

The Commission gave the following answer:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getAllAnswers.do?reference=P-2009-1843&language=EN>

Parliamentary questions

30 April 2009 P-1843/2009

Answer given by Ms Vassiliou on behalf of the Commission

Impartiality and independence are a pre-requisite for the involvement of experts. In practice, there is a self-reinforcing feedback loop between expertise to work for standard setting bodies, and the expertise needed to provide high quality advice. Excellence in their field results in independent experts receiving invitations to assist standard setting bodies, an activity which further augments their expertise, which makes them more attractive for advisory bodies, etc.

Some of the most competent SCENIHR experts on Electromagnetic Fields (EMF) were indeed also engaged in ICNIRP activities. Notably, ICNIRP is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and gives independent advice to regulators around the world. The ICNIRP itself regularly evaluates its own recommendations in the light of newly available scientific results published in peer-reviewed journals. The Commission would also like to stress that the work by ICNIRP focuses on limit values while the Scientific Committee limits itself to reviewing the most current scientific findings and examining their possible implications. The Commission believes that the Scientific Committee as a whole was in a position to achieve a high level of impartiality and independence because of the process through which the Committee reaches its conclusions. The procedure followed to produce a scientific opinion includes (i) using as a basis peer-reviewed scientific publications, (ii) cross-examining the text, (iii) having a Commission Scientific Officer acting as a neutral third party to facilitate this adversarial scientific discussion, and, whenever possible, (iv) engaging all stakeholders by opening a public consultation or organising a scientific hearing on the draft scientific opinion. Moreover, recognising practical limits to ensuring excellence, transparency, and independence and acknowledging that science continually advances, the

Commission requests periodic updates of its opinions (i) to take into account the most recent scientific developments and (ii) to renew the membership of the expert working groups.

Lowering limits of EMF has financial consequences for the sector and should only be imposed when there would be clear evidence that they would have a positive effect on health. According to the advice the Commission received this would not be the case. It is to be noted, that ceiling values of exposure limits are generally only reached in very exceptional circumstances. The average exposure of the public to EMFs is many factors below the set safety limits.

As indicated above, the Commission realises that being or having been a member of the ICNIRP could be seen to have reduced the independence of the individuals concerned. However, in line with the established working procedures(1) of the Scientific Committees, all relevant interests and activities of all experts participating in the work of the Scientific Committees are being discussed and assessed by the members of that Committee. Furthermore, the Commission would like to clarify that the role of the SCENIHR was not to carry out an assessment of the limits proposed by ICNIRP per se but of the scientific evidence on possible health effects of EMF available at that time. Finally, the Commission is of the opinion that had there been a conflict of interest, the procedures in place and the facilitation by Commission civil servants would have been able to address it.

The Commission wishes to refer the Honorable Member to the answers given above while stressing that it strives to maintain and increase, if possible, the excellence, independence, and transparency of the work of its Scientific Committees. Specifically, the Commission will seek to minimise conflicts of interest further and pay even greater attention to the composition of the working groups, while not putting scientific excellence at risk in the future.

Last updated: 8 May 2009

Informant: Martin Weatherall

[<http://omega.twoday.net/search?q=SCENIHR>

<http://omega.twoday.net/search?q=ICNIRP>

<http://omega.twoday.net/search?q=limit+value>

<http://omega.twoday.net/search?q=electromagnetic+radiation>

<http://omega.twoday.net/search?q=health+effect>]