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Hyping Health Risks: Environmental Hazards In Daily Life And The Science Of Epidemiology

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HYPING HEALTH RISKS

Environmental Hazards in Daily Life and
the Science of Epidemiology

GEOFFREY C. KABAT



Synopsis

The media constantly bombard us with news of health hazards lurking in our everyday lives, but many of these hazards turn out to have been greatly overblown. According to author and epidemiologist Geoffrey C. Kabat, this hyping of low-level environmental hazards leads to needless anxiety and confusion on the part of the public concerning which exposures have important effects on health and which are likely to have minimal or no effect. Kabat approaches health scares as "social facts" and shows that a variety of factors can contribute to the inflating of a hazard. These include skewed reporting by the media, but also, surprisingly, the actions of researchers who may emphasize certain findings while ignoring others; regulatory and health agencies eager to show their responsiveness to the health concerns of the public; and politicians and advocates with a stake in a particular outcome. By means of four case studies, Kabat demonstrates how a powerful confluence of interests can lead to overstating or distorting the scientific evidence. He considers the health risks of pollutants such as DDT as a cause of breast cancer, electromagnetic fields from power lines, radon within residences, and secondhand tobacco smoke. Tracing the trajectory of each of these hazards from its initial emergence to the present, Kabat shows how publication of more rigorous studies and critical assessments ultimately help put hazards in perspective.

Book Information

File Size: 2954 KB

Print Length: 274 pages

Publisher: Columbia University Press; 1 edition (July 7, 2008)

Publication Date: July 7, 2008

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B006MJKLGG

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #450,749 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #29
in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Medical eBooks > Administration & Policy > Health Risk

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Strong arguments are presented no doubt. However, clear cut recommendations are lacking.

In a dispassionate and painstaking way, Kabat sheds light on four health scares: radon, electromagnetic fields from power lines, DDT as a cause of breast cancer, and second-hand tobacco smoke. If epidemiologists are to contribute useful insights, they need to be mindful of strengths versus weaknesses in evidence. Kabat quotes a distinguished pioneer of risks associated with cigarettes, Sir Richard Peto: "epidemiology is so beautiful and provides such an important perspective on human life and death, but an incredible amount of rubbish is published." After hyping by journalists, rubbish can be given undue credibility by governments eager to respond to public concerns. John Ioannidis: "In the past, we had few research findings, while currently we have too many research findings. Therefore, getting rid of tentative but wrong research findings should become at least as important as finding new ones." Kabat supports weighing evidence in a critically-minded, inter-disciplinary way. The only way to overcome misinformation is via still stronger science. Chapter 2 overviews the field of epidemiology. Kabat mentions examples of valuable achievements: cholera as a water-borne disease; smoking and cancers; alcohol and cancers; risk factors for heart disease; estrogen, progesterone and breast cancer; sleep position and sudden infant death syndrome; solar radiation and skin cancer; hepatitis B and liver cancer. Cholera was a clear cause, a problem amenable to investigation by mapping victims and water supplies. Kabat readably integrates narrow articles into an understandable big picture. Physicist William R. Bennett (pioneer of gas lasers) calculated a barefoot railroad worker standing on wet tracks bearing electric current would receive a dose orders of magnitude lower than fields normally inside our bodies. New England Journal of Medicine: "all these epidemiological studies have been conducted in pursuit of a cause of cancer for which there is no plausible biologic basis." Kabat: "it is hard to escape the impression that the reluctance of the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences working group to close the door on the possibility of electromagnetic force as a cause of leukemia had more to do with its members' stake in this area of research than with scientific rigor." Self-interest may have blinded them to "fundamental insights about the phenomenon whose effects they were investigating." Epidemiology should work in conjunction with other disciplines, not disregard them. It

is when health scares are at their most contentious that society is in most need of scientists willing to look honestly at a topic, without succumbing to prevailing fashion. Without an unswerving commitment to seek the truth, science ill-serves the public good. Kabat offers worthy lessons to epidemiologists who aspire to serve via honest practice. Well done.

Dr. Kabat's analysis of how the media presents scientific studies and how the public is easily fooled into fear by perceptions that the "cause of the day" represents a real and imminent threat to their lives is beautifully done. Dr. Kabat avoids the easy road of political polemic and presents his work in a style that's rigorous and above attack. I spend an inordinate amount of time researching current news and opinions regarding one of the subjects he treats (the "secondhand smoke scare" issue) and have observed that the critics who might normally be expected to attack a work like this are simply dead silent: they have no substantive criticisms to offer and the style of his work doesn't lend itself well to simple silly mudslinging. And while he treats each of several different problems independently within their own sections of the book, he does a beautiful job of couching those analyses within a larger themed structure that draws a compelling picture of a need for a wide reassessment of how scientific research is done and presented to the public in today's world of headline-hungry media. The approach and style is more formal than some other books in the same area (My own work, while sticking tightly to a high standard of accuracy, tends to be a bit more polemic than Kabat's.) and the font size could have been just a bit larger (Hey, I'm being picky here, but once you get over 40 or so you appreciate bigger fonts!) but the content is absolutely stellar and I have no hesitation at all in giving both the book and Dr. Kabat a five star review. It's difficult for a scientist or researcher in today's competitive grant-seeking market to step outside the "popular" approach to research that simply accepts the strictures of rubber stamping the politically correct views that control the pursestrings, but Kabat evidently has more integrity than most who are out there and as you read "Hyping..." I think you'll agree he has what it takes to back up his stand. It's just sad that there aren't more professionals with similar courage. Michael J. McFadden
Author of *Dissecting Antismokers' Brains*

Kabat's book should be required reading for all public health graduate students and single-issue health activists. From the office of the Surgeon General to city hall, advocacy has frequently supplanted sound science in the service of "good public health policy". The hallmark of advocacy triumphing over science is a selective and result oriented use of data, starting with the institutions that fund the studies. It is currently heresy to challenge the science behind ETS research and

regulation. You cannot get a study approved that challenges the validity of the questionnaires and other proxy measures used to characterize ETS exposure, or openly seeks to challenge inadequate measures of bias and confounding. As a consequence, a mountain of research money is being spent piling on more biased studies conducted by advocates. It's not a conspiracy. It is what political correctness does to public health. We need more public health heretics like Kabat.

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