

The Letter BEMS Refused To Print

In its January/February 2002 issue, the Bioelectromagnetics Society Newsletter ran a commentary by Asher Sheppard and Quirino Balzano under the title "All the News That Is Fit To Spin." The two Motorola consultants made it clear that they took strong exception to our news item on their recent paper which attacked the application of the precautionary principle to RF radiation in general and to mobile phones in particular. They also were stung by a short item on our "Wish List for 2003," in which we questioned their state of mind when writing that paper.

Sheppard and Balzano accused us of "outrageous and distorting journalistic excesses," and of mocking not only their work but also the "distinguished scientists" who had helped them prepare their paper. They also berated us for making what they called a "snide editorial comment."

After reading this, we immediately asked Mays Swicord, the Motorola staffer who serves as the editor of the BEMS Newsletter, for an opportunity to respond. Our contribution would be "most welcome," he replied. But when we later forwarded our letter, BEMS refused to publish it.

Janet Lathrop, the managing editor of the newsletter, told us that our comments about George Carlo were "closer to libel than

the BEMS Newsletter is prepared to go."

We called Swicord, who told us that the objective of the newsletter is to address "scientific" issues and that publishing our letter would take the newsletter "in a direction that is unhealthy for the society." We asked how our statement that Carlo had run a "confidence game" was any more libelous than the accusations leveled against Microwave News by Sheppard and Balzano. "We should have removed [them] from the letter," he said, adding that the society should "apologize openly" for allowing them in print.

We then appealed to Frank Prato, the president of BEMS. He replied that he, too, was concerned about the liability issue and would therefore not overrule the editors' decision.

Reprinted below is our response to Sheppard and Balzano which BEMS declined to publish in the March/April newsletter. BEMS' apology did not appear in that issue either. See also p.19 for a commentary on this affair and the state of BEMS on its 25th anniversary.

Note that after we sent our letter to BEMS, the WHO EMF project decided not to invoke the precautionary principle (see p.1 and p.19). The others on the list below, to the best of our knowledge, are holding firm.

April 9, 2003

To the Editor:

Asher Sheppard and Quirino Balzano say that *Microwave News* ran an unfair news item about their paper, which was critical of the precautionary principle. They do not, however, point to a single factual error in our 300-word item.

Sheppard and Balzano take offense at our subhead, "The Decline and Fall of Modern Society." Readers of the *BEMS Newsletter* can judge for themselves whether this headline does damage to their message. Here, in its entirety, is the last paragraph of their conclusions, which is also the last paragraph of their paper:

Unless current efforts lead to its successful reformulation, the precautionary principle could institutionalize excessive caution and thus deepen rather than alleviate alarm from the doom-laden hypothetical risks called "perceived threats." The resulting suppression of innovation and technological progress would inevitably have disastrous effects on society, leaving it susceptible to the decay that over time turns great civilizations into antique ruins. It is hopeful that from the inherent contradictions of the precautionary principle will be born new environmental and health policies that use the uncertainties of scientific discovery for beneficial stewardship of life and human society.

Perhaps we should have run a headline such as: "Fixed Precautionary Principle Would Make Society Better." Perhaps not. The note of optimism in that last sentence is out of step with the nonstop attacks on the precautionary principle that make up most of what is written on the other 17 pages of their paper. We continue to believe that our article accurately reflects their message.

Sheppard and Balzano are also in a huff over our editorial comment. They call it sarcasm. We call it satire. Whatever you call it, it is our opinion and is clearly labeled as such. We each have our own opinions: Theirs took 18 pages, ours three lines. We thought about writing a detailed editorial, but their rant struck us as so wrongheaded in so many ways that we opted for brevity.

What are other people doing and saying? In February, the World Health Organization (WHO) International EMF Project announced that it is invoking the precautionary principle to address RF health risks. (They have a similar outlook on power-frequency EMFs.)

The WHO is one of the most recent converts. Here are some others who have either set precautionary exposure limits or advised precaution with respect to the use of mobile phones and the siting of mobile phone antennas:

- Government of Italy (1998)
- Advisory Board on Non-Ionizing Radiation to the Czech National Institute of Public Health (1999)
- Government of Switzerland (1999-2000)
- U.K. Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, also known as the Stewart Committee (2000)
- Advisory Committee to the Director-General of Health of France, also known as the Zmirou Committee (2001)
- British Medical Association (2001)
- German Academy of Pediatrics (2001)
- German Radiation Protection Commission (2001)
- Advisory Panel to the Spanish Ministry of Health (2001)
- German Federal Office for Radiation Protection (2002)
- Russian National Committee on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (2002)
- City of Paris (2003)

Sheppard and Balzano would have us believe that invoking the precautionary principle is equivalent to succumbing to some vague and illegitimate fear. Here, again, we disagree. Over the years, *Microwave News* has reported on a number of key experimental findings that point to the possibility of serious health effects. They must be either refuted or confirmed—not simply denied. Until then, a precautionary approach is the appropriate response in order to give fair warning to the more than one billion people who regularly place an RF transmitter next to their brains.

One reason these findings remain unresolved is that the wireless industry allowed (encouraged?) George Carlo to play a six-year, \$25-million confidence game instead of running the RF research program that the industry promised. Motorola, for which both Sheppard and Balzano are consultants, and the other companies never exposed Carlo's deception.

Sheppard and Balzano say that we also mocked the significant contribution of John Graham, whom they acknowledge in their paper. Graham himself was an active player in Carlo's con game. The Center for Risk Analysis, which Graham used to run at the Harvard School of Public Health, received more than \$419,000 from Carlo so that his Wireless Technology Research program would have a veneer of respectability. (Sheppard was a member of the Harvard peer-review panel.)

Finally, we wonder why Motorola's Mays Swicord allowed Sheppard and Balzano to voice their complaints in the *BEMS Newsletter*. Custom dictates that offended parties write to the publication that they believe did them wrong, not to a publication where one of their co-workers runs the show.

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