EMFs

House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. June 2006
Watching the Directives: Scientific advice on the EU Physical Agents (Electromagnetic Fields) Directive

This session of the Committee was set in motion by fears that the new Directive would restrict the use of medical MRI scanners. The effect would be to encourage the use of ionising radiation (X rays) as an alternative. The Committee concludes that the Directive was not as well advised as it could have been. Clarification of the meaning of exposure action levels is provided; it is a very precautionary standard.
The Committee seem to conclude that scientific evidence of biological effects was probably mistranslated as 'evidence of harm' when setting exposure action levels. The suggestion made is that enthusiasm for protection had distracted the participants from a better-informed course of action.

In particular it is important to note that the action levels do not mark a boundary between harm and safety. Commissioner Spidla said, in November 2005, that "The Directive is designed to protect workers against excessive exposure to MRI and EMF which scientific experts agree is dangerous for health". The Committee emphatically refute this assertion and report that the Commissions own officials do not agree with it.

The Committee add the following statement to the record:

> *the limits are intended to be precautionary: the exposure levels are set so as to ensure that workers are protected from any possibility of adverse health effects, even though these are not necessarily proven.*
>
> *The lack of available evidence of adverse health effects at present is not reason in itself to avoid taking preventative action, but it should require a convincing scientific case to be made in favour of statutory regulation, including a balancing of the risks of harm against the costs, pending the establishment of a fuller evidence base.*

Comment
The view seems to be that the Directive could have come to very different, less precautionary, conclusions without reducing the actual level of occupational health protection provided.

In the end, the enthusiasm for criticising the Directive and the mistakes that were made in its generation were moderately expressed. This was probably because the science remains highly uncertain and direct evidence of mis-regulation could not be stated with clear authority.

Our long-held view has been that the action levels included in the Directive do not form a reasonable basis for judging breach of duty of care in civil cases. We see no reason to revise this view on reading the Committee report.