

An Assessment of CANWEA's Research
On Health Issues with Wind Turbines
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Probably the most contentious area surrounding wind turbines is the noise they produce and its potential health effect on neighbors. In Ontario there are basically two sides to this argument. On one side is a group of doctors who have studied the complaints and would like someone, presumably the government, to conduct an epidemiological study to scientifically establish what the health affects of wind turbine noise might be. On the other side is the wind energy community who argues that there is no evidence in peer-reviewed literature that there is any health affect, and thus a study is unnecessary. For simplicity, I'll call the first side The Doctors, which includes names familiar to anyone following this debate – McMurtry, Pierpont, Nissenbaum etc. I'll call the second group CanWEA, the Canadian Wind Energy Association, a lobbyist for the wind industry. Their spokesman, Sean Whittaker, has appeared in the media numerous times.

A typical Whittaker statement is "It's certainly of concern, but you do have to look at the peer-reviewed research that's been done on the subject and what that tells you." I've done just that, going to the CanWEA web site to see what their research shows. The page I worked from is at: http://www.canwea.ca/media/release/release_e.php?newsId=37, and is titled "Scientists conclude that there is no evidence that wind turbines have an adverse impact on human health." At the bottom of that page are 7 references, described as: "For reference, the Canadian Wind Energy Association (CanWEA) has compiled a list of articles and publications on the subject from reputable sources in Europe and North America."

CanWEA has included a quote from each of these sources that appears to support their contention. As any reader will quickly discover, however, these quotes generally have little to do with the gist of the article. It quickly becomes obvious that CanWEA has "cherry-picked" the articles for the most supportive sentence, completely out of context.

Anyone can play this game, and as an example I could take The Doctor's position and use quotes out of the very same 7 references to support it. Such a statement might look something like:

There are numerous reports of health issues caused by wind turbines and we want to have an epidemiological study to determine the facts. We have compiled a list of articles and publications on the subject from reputable sources in Europe and North America.

1. Leventhall. “Attention should be focused on the audio frequency fluctuating swish, which some people may well find to be very disturbing and stressful, depending on its level.”
2. Ramakrishnan. “However, additional concerns still need to be addressed in the next round of revisions to their assessment process. These revisions may need to be addressed after the results from future research provide scientifically consistent data for effects such as meteorology, human response and turbine noise source character.”
3. Rogers. “Community noise standards are important to ensure livable communities. Wind turbines must be held to comply with these regulations.”
4. Salford. “The results showed that 27 of the 133 windfarm sites operational across the UK at the time of the survey had attracted noise complaints at some point.”
5. Lancet. “In varying degrees these [renewable] sources share four main drawbacks:... ; and environmental effects, aesthetic effects, or both, that might in part off set the broader environmental and health gains derived from lower air pollution and greenhouse-gas emissions.”
6. Colby. “Despite extensive searching of the current literature, limited information is available on health concerns relating to wind turbines.”
7. WHO. “health effects from wind energy are negligible, however issues such as sleep disturbance, school absenteeism, eventually resulting from noise in vicinity, could not be evaluated.”

Why don't they? Aside from the time constraints of not having their livelihoods supplied by the wind energy industry, they have a different set of priorities. CanWEA's main interest, perhaps their only interest, is making money for their clients and themselves. With that goal, the appearance of being truthful is far more important than actually being truthful. The Doctors, on the other hand, deal with real people having real health issues, and the real truth is the basis of how they deal. And the real truth being conveyed by these 7 references – most of which are, as CanWEA says, respectable - has very little to do with health issues and epidemiological studies for people living in the shadow of wind turbines.

To use these otherwise useful references in this way is fundamentally dishonest, but it creates a “he said, she said” confusion that serves the interests of the industry. I have prepared a separate report (in the interests of keeping this short) giving my take on the gist of each of the 7 references above, and the reader can judge for themselves if CanWEA's use of the references is honest or not. And if you think I've been dishonest, please let me know the particulars and I'll certainly respond.