

TRUST ME, I'M A DOCTOR

JOURNAL OF BIOELECTRICITY, 8(2), v- vi (1989)

EDITORIAL

During a recent legal proceeding in Canada involving health hazards of powerlines, Linda Erdreich testified for the power company. Based on an analysis of "every study that could be considered as relevant to this Inquiry," she said that the powerline electric and magnetic fields posed no risk to human health. The essence of her position was that we could have faith in her knowledge of bioelectricity and her integrity as an independent scientist. Erdreich's school-teacher manner and neat appearance meshed well with her testimony, and altogether they said this: I'm a doctor, trust me, these powerlines are safe.

After obtaining a Ph.D. in epidemiology, Erdreich worked 7 years at Reagan's Environmental Protection Agency performing risk assessments for toxic chemicals and waste dumps. About 6 weeks prior to her testimony, she was hired by Energy Research Associates, Incorporated (ERI). The power company hired ERI, which sent Erdreich to Canada to testify.

Erdreich conceded that she didn't know the difference between an electric field and a magnetic field, and that she had begun her studies in bioelectricity only after taking the ERI job. Her written report, however, was a polished collection of half-truths which evinced a degree of rhetorical sophistication beyond that of a neophyte. Clearly, the words and method of analysis used by Erdreich were in ERI's word processor prior to her employment. Who, then, is ERI?

The effort to assuage public concern over powerlines has spawned significant economic activity in the penumbra of the power industry: Someone from the power-industry orbit starts a company and it soon becomes favored with industry business. These companies provide many services including contract research, risk analysis, and what is euphemistically called education of the public. ERI, a privately held New York-based consulting company, is a good example: One of its owners is Robert Kavet, who for many years was an important executive at the Electric Power Research Institute. He participated in the award of millions of dollars for research ostensibly geared toward evaluating the health-risk issue. Now, his company is on the receiving end of the flow of industry dollars.

ERI is a metastasis of a chronic power-industry disease—the use of dollars to buy science that will support corporate decisions in the face of contrary data. Perhaps ERI is entitled to sell, and the power companies are entitled to spend their dollars in any manner they choose. There is no entitlement, however, to hide one's role in a scenario. It would not have been credible for Kavet to give Erdreich's testimony: Erdreich-Kavet's new employee-would have seemed even less credible if these links had been disclosed.

The public has an absolute right to know who bought and paid for the goods and services that are being used to try and persuade them. ERI urges the truth of a proposition, and it is in its economic interest to do so. The appropriate model for this activity is not the doctor, who acts on

our behalf, but the salesman, who acts on his own behalf.

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