

Perspectives

Wind farms and health: who is fomenting community anxieties?



Public health expert
Simon Chapman points to
activists with hidden agendas

Wind farms are a main component of efforts to harness renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Globally, there are an estimated 120 000 wind turbines, and this number is increasing rapidly, with China, the United States, Germany, Spain and India being the largest wind energy producers.

Commercial wind farms began operating more than 20 years ago, but claims that they directly cause illness (often rapid, acute effects from even single exposures) are far more recent. Together, these observations indicate sociogenic dimensions to this latest example of anxieties about modern technology. Anti-wind-farm websites reveal an ever-expanding and often bizarre array of self-reported symptoms — tellingly never raised by landowners who earn income by hosting turbines, but rather by neighbours with land unsuitable for hosting turbines and by people with prior histories of opposition to wind farms. It has long been observed that envy of neighbours' turbine-hosting incomes, beliefs that turbines are ugly with no local community benefit, preference for pristine bucolic environments and NIMBYism (not-in-my-backyard-ism) all predict complaints.^{1,2}

These diverse symptoms are lumped together as “wind turbine syndrome”, a popularised catch-all term that yields zero returns from searches of the research literature in PubMed or Web of Science. The most recent review of published evidence concluded (consistent with four previous reviews) that health effects among some living near wind turbines “are more likely attributed to physical manifestation from an annoyed state than from wind turbines themselves”.³ In other words, anger about or fear of turbines can make people sick. Another review of health effects of inaudible low frequency infrasound, regularly demonised by anti-wind-farm activists as silently noxious, concluded “There is no consistent evidence of any physiological or behavioural effect of acute exposure to infrasound in humans”.⁴ The psychogenic and sociogenic nature of this phenomenon appears to parallel recent findings about complaints and “illness” said to be generated by exposure to mobile phone base stations and powerlines.⁵

The recent rise of complaints appears to be closely associated with advocacy from anti-wind-farm interest groups, such as the Waubra Foundation. Future research will need to test for temporal associations between this Foundation's publicity and its movement through rural communities, and case reports of health effects.

The Waubra Foundation's chairman is Peter Mitchell, who has major interests in uranium and coal seam gas and, at least



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until February 2011, was also chairman of the Science and Economics Committee of the Australian Landscape Guardians. Like the United Kingdom-based Coastal Guardians, the Landscape Guardians have links to those who oppose wind farms but are silent on “guarding” Australian rural landscapes from mining.⁶ The Waubra Foundation, the Landscape Guardians and the Mitchell family's investment company Lowell Capital all have the same post office box, yet Sarah Laurie from the Foundation wrote recently “The Waubra Foundation is not a front for the Landscape Guardians... Peter Mitchell... has kindly made his mailbox available for the use of the Foundation, as we have extremely limited financial resources”.⁷

The Victorian Government's recent decision (August 2011) to allow landowners to veto turbines within 2 km of houses⁸ and hostile comments from the New South Wales Premier⁹ threaten to severely limit wind farm development in Australia. Spurious health claims fanned by anti-wind-farm activists, often with vested interests, are a key component influencing these politics. The National Health and Medical Research Council is working on an update of its 2010 review.¹⁰ That agency's fundamental commitment to the importance of evidence-based policy will oblige it to highlight both the sociogenic aspects of this phenomenon and the competing interests of many of those standing behind the amplification of this latest textbook example of suggestion and mass hysteria.¹¹

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