

# Reducing cancer panic

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New research has allayed some panic about suspected cancer-causing agents, such as deodorants, coffee and artificial sweeteners. A risk assessment tool has been developed through the Cancer Control Program at South Eastern Sydney & Illawarra Health (SESIH) by a University of New South Wales (UNSW) researcher, Professor Bernard Stewart.

“Our tool will help establish if the level of risk is high – say, on a par with smoking – or unlikely such as using deodorants, artificial sweeteners and drinking coffee or fluoridated water – or at risk bands in between,” said Professor Stewart.

“The media are filled with reports about possible causes of cancer: most commonly, a new and unexpected exposure to a previously suspected carcinogen.

“It’s one thing to know that arsenic is carcinogenic - but quite another to distinguish between different methods of exposure. That’s what this approach achieves,” said Professor Stewart. “For instance, smelter workers who are exposed to arsenic emissions are much more likely to develop cancer than children who have played on climbing frames constructed from arsenic-treated timber – but the carcinogen is the same.”

Until now there have only been mathematical risk assessments, which are complicated and of limited application.

“Our approach can be used whenever carcinogenic risk can be implied,”

said Professor Stewart.

In an issue of the journal *Mutation Research Reviews*, the newly developed procedure has been applied to more than than sixty situations, ranging from active smoking to electromagnetic fields in the workplace – which are all deemed to offer some degree of carcinogenic risk. Consequently, each situation can be located within one of five bands corresponding to proven, likely, inferred, unknown or unlikely risk of carcinogenic outcome.

Surveys suggest that tobacco smoking is correctly identified as the major cause of cancer, but a host of other situations – calling on a mobile phone, air pollution, being exposed to DDT, eating dioxin-contaminated fish, using hairdyes, and drinking alcoholic beverages – are often equated.

“We now have a means of indicating which carcinogenic risks are comparable by reference to the type of evidence available,” says Professor Stewart. “This risk assessment gives the lie to the attitude that ‘Everything causes cancer’.”

The Cancer Council Australia’s Chief Executive Officer, Professor Ian Olver, said The Cancer Council was frequently called on to provide evidence-based comment to help the media and public make sense of the many and frequent reports about risks from exposure to suspected carcinogens.

“Being able to draw on an evidence base that evaluates carcinogenic risk based on different types of exposure will be an invaluable resource to help organisations like The Cancer Council,” Professor Olver said. “We want to ensure the public has accurate information about where carcinogens pose a genuine concern and how people can best reduce their risk.”

Source: University of New South Wales

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