

**STUFF** – education

Janine Rankin. November 16, 2017

## **MASSEY ACADEMICS SEEK LEGAL ADVICE**

Two Massey staff and a Palmerston North consultant are fighting to restore their international reputations after the university's response to a complaint of dodgy research was released to Australian media.

The researchers, specialising in low-frequency sound, say Massey did not give them a chance to give their side of the story before the complainant was told the university might retract the case study they co-authored.

Consultant Bruce Rapley, Huub Bakker, from the School of Engineering and Advanced Technology, and Rachel Summers, from the School of People, Environment and Planning, were accused of carrying out an unethical human experiment in New South Wales two years ago.

It involved two people, who took the group on a field trip while they were working on their own time, on annual leave from the university.

Rapley said they were in Australia at the invitation of the Waubra Foundation to take sound recordings in the vicinity of two coal-fired power stations and an underground coalmine.

The foundation's objectives include promotion of human health and wellbeing through the prevention and control of diseases and other adverse health effects due to industrial sound and vibration.

Rapley said there was no experiment, and therefore no need for ethics committee approval.

The team simply witnessed an incident in which their companions suddenly experienced severe symptoms of vertigo and nausea, and they took sound readings and recorded what happened.

They later proposed that the symptoms could have been caused by low-frequency sound channelling between two buildings in the small town of Taralga from a wind farm they did not know was there and which was not visible on the day.

The complainant was retired Sydney University professor Simon Chapman, who has clashed with them in the past about whether inaudible, low-frequency wind farm noise could harm people.

Chapman described the case study as "highly disturbing", and said their actions on the day were "reckless".

He later shared with media the contents of a letter from Massey's assistant vice-chancellor Giselle Byrnes, which said the university was undertaking an "educative review" with the researchers, and was considering retracting the research.

Byrnes said the complaint had raised serious and significant questions about the apparent lack of ethical approval.

Rapley said the university's letter appeared to accept that a breach of ethics had occurred before any investigation took place or the researchers knew there had been a complaint.

It was a breach of natural justice, he said.

"The university has found us guilty. It means my reputation is in tatters."

Rapley said the three were taking legal advice as they sought mediation with the university before considering other options.

Byrnes told *Stuff* that Massey University considered research ethics and research standards to be of utmost importance and value.

"We take seriously any questioning about research standards."

She confirmed the two Massey staff were advised about the complaint in a letter dated November 2, the same day the complainant was responded to.

Byrnes said the university had yet to complete interviews as part of its probe before making a decision.

Educative review and retraction of the researchers' involvement in the paper were options open to the university at the conclusion of the review, she said.

Byrnes did not respond to a question about why her letter talked about ensuring such a breach was not "repeated".

Nor did she answer a question about whether the university acknowledged the harm caused to the reputation of the researchers involved by the public reporting of her comments.

**- Stuff**

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