

National Health and Medical Research Council

[14:49]

Senator MADIGAN: My questions are with regard to the NHMRC draft information paper on the evidence on wind farms and human health. My office has received information that the NHMRC was cautioned about the involvement in this project of an acoustician working for Sinclair Knight Merz, Dr Norm Broner. As you are probably aware, SKM is a major consultant utilised extensively by the wind industry. Secondly, I understand that the NHMRC was cautioned against the involvement in this draft paper of Dr Liz Hanna, president of the Climate and Health Alliance. The Climate and Health Alliance has also been an aggressive pro wind campaigner, publicly supporting a pro-wind digital media campaign by Danish wind conglomerate Vestas. My first question is: how have conflicts of interest been identified and managed by the NHMRC?

Prof. McCallum : We have a defined process and policy for the identification of conflicts and then the discussion of those between the office of the NHMRC—in this case, my office—and the chair of that group. Any conflicts deemed to be major are excluded. You have to balance, of course, the need for expertise in a group where there are very few experts with the fact that there will be interests that people declare. Those conflicts are then managed according to that protocol. People may stand out from meetings on issues in which they have a conflict.

Senator MADIGAN: Why are these conflicts even there when the NHMRC is supposed to be independent?

Prof. Anderson : I am sorry, Senator, but I did not quite catch your question.

Senator MADIGAN: Why are these conflicts even there when the NHMRC is supposed to be independent?

Prof. Anderson : Senator, I am sure you will understand, in the wide range of activities we do, that when we engage experts across everything we do—mostly, of course, around peer review—there is always a call between people who have expertise in the area whose brains we need at the table, if I could put it that way, versus people who have a vested interest, a conflict of interest, that moves beyond. As John said, for all our committees, this is really a moment by moment process we undertake so that chairs are briefed. The moment the conflict of interest arises, our policy is those people are outside the room. The other way we deal with it, of course, is to put all the declarations of conflicts in the public domain. So that does allow people to challenge this, where required. Certainly that was true of the wind farm expert group; they were all in the public domain.

Senator MADIGAN: Why is the only acoustician on that panel someone who has officially undisclosed strong financial ties with the wind industry and perhaps possibly a vested commercial interest in denying the adverse health effects?

Prof. Anderson : That allegation has not been brought to our attention before, as far as I am aware.

Prof. McCallum : The conflicts of the acoustician you mentioned were declared. We have a very, very experienced chair of that committee. He and I determined that the balance of that expertise against the interests that person had were ones that could be managed within the context of that committee.

Senator MADIGAN: Given that the NHMRC has recommended further research into this area, how is it that the NHMRC is going to make sure that there are no wind industry advocates in the ranks of the researchers and that properly conducted and truly independent research will take place?

Prof. Anderson : I will clarify on the further research. The further research will be conducted by researchers out there in universities, medical research institutes and hospitals. So provided that we decide to do this, which we probably will after we have had the feedback from the community, we will identify the areas of research that are needed. They are quite well identified already in the information paper. We will then advertise for people to apply for funding to conduct the research. We will do our usual high quality peer review process. By 'we', I mean that we will set up peer review panels to do the analysis on which research should be funded. So that research will not be done by officers of the NHMRC. It will be done in the university sector.

Senator MADIGAN: Mary Morris was the author of the only Australian research that met the criteria for the NHMRC wind farms and human health review, yet in direct contradiction to the research findings, you told the PM program on ABC radio:

The effects of noise on people from wind farms would be limited to less than half a kilometre.

Mary Morris's report makes it clear there have been reported impacts out to 10 kilometres. Did you read her report?

Prof. Anderson : I relied on the literature review that was done and the information paper. In the information paper there are many reports of noise from wind farms. I am sure you are aware, having read it, that the report says that nearly all the research that has been done has a so-called selection bias—that is, people not deliberately but inadvertently getting feedback from people who already knew what the research was about. Like most epidemiology, this is really quite a complex issue. The report, I think, sets out very clearly and in some detail why all the research is either of poor quality or not so poor quality. I am aware of Dr Morris's comments. She has contacted me. I have referred them on to the expert committee to take into account as we update this draft. But it is not the only report of noise around wind farms. I think the summary is very accurate:

There is consistent but poor quality evidence that proximity to wind farms is associated with annoyance and less consistently with sleep disturbance and poorer quality of life.

That is under the noise heading. I fully respect Dr Morris's research, but there is quite a lot of other research. In the eyes of our experts, this research is of relatively poor quality for technical scientific reasons.

CHAIR: Could you make the next question your last, please, Senator Madigan.

Senator MADIGAN: Would the NHMRC consider in its further deliberations—you have made it clear—that you actually have not decided to do any more? That is what you said. If you are going to have acousticians that obviously have a perceived conflict of interest with some people in the community, are you going to balance that with some other acousticians? I can assure you there are other acousticians out there in the community who are as adequately qualified as Dr Norm Broner. You will at least have a balance on that committee.

Prof. Anderson : One of the recommendations of the review is that further research be done in the noise and acoustics area. That is not medical research, so we would work with other departments to do that. But if research needs to be done—

Senator MADIGAN: I am talking about the peer review. You were talking about a review of information. I am suggesting to you that it would be a good thing to have a balance on that committee between an opposing professional and a pro industry professional.

Prof. Anderson : Well, I am not accepting, because I do not know whether this person was pro industry. He was identified as somebody with particular expertise. I take your comment. We are always very keen to make sure we have expertise and conflicts of interest out in public. If there are matters we need to take into account, and you have brought them to my attention, I will take them into account.

Senator MADIGAN: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR: Senator Di Natale, you had questions in this area?

Senator DI NATALE: I do. Can I conclude from the NHMRC study into wind turbines that there is no evidence that a discrete condition known as wind turbine syndrome exists?

Prof. Anderson : I do not think our report says—

Senator DI NATALE: Would that be a fair statement?

Prof. Anderson : No, Senator. I think you are putting words in my mouth. I think the report says what it says. At this stage, there is no reliable or consistent evidence that wind farms directly cause adverse health effects in humans. That is no reliable or consistent evidence at this time. So I do not think you should push me to conclude beyond what my expert committee has concluded.

Senator DI NATALE: Let us say I live next door to a telegraph pole. There is no evidence that that is not making me sick. I am asking you to prove a negative. I want to be clear here. You did not find any evidence for a condition known as wind turbine syndrome as part of your study? Is that a correct statement?

Prof. Anderson : No, it was not in the terms of reference for the expert group to do that. I just want to make sure we are on the same page here. This is an information paper, and draft, for that matter. It is not the NHMRC's position paper. Our position paper was put out in 2010. We will update our position paper after we have completed the feedback from the community on the information paper, looked at the evidence that has occurred since then, as we have said on our website, and then finalised the information paper. Then we will consider what extra research needs to be done. Since the research so far is poor quality, it is almost certain that there is research that needs to be done. The second thing is we will update our position paper. I think that position paper is more relevant to your point.

Senator DI NATALE: I am trying to understand why you are commissioning more research into this field given that nothing you have found indicates that this is a cause for concern.

Prof. Anderson : Well, I do not think, again with respect, you have quite summarised our position. We have said—

Senator DI NATALE: Let me ask you this question: have you found anything that gives you cause for concern here?

Prof. Anderson : Yes. The poor quality of the research so far.

Senator DI NATALE: But there is no research into whether aliens—

CHAIR: Senator Di Natale, can you ask questions, not debate the issue.

Senator DI NATALE: This goes to the heart of the question. The fact that there is no research to arrive at a particular position is not in and of itself a reason to conduct research into a particular area that most people in the scientific community would regard as being unlikely, or most people would suggest almost certainly not an area for concern. What I am asking is: given that you have not found any positive evidence to suggest that there is an area of concern and your only rationale for wanting to conduct more research into this is that there is very little good quality evidence, why are you suggesting that we go down that path?

Prof. Anderson : The conclusion of the report is there is consistent, though poor quality, evidence that proximity to wind farms is associated with annoyance and less consistent evidence with sleep disturbance and poorer quality of life. I am sure you would understand, Senator, given your training, that annoyance in the long term, as the report says, can turn into poor physical health through stress. We may have to disagree on this. I do not think that you can dismiss easily community concern about this matter. How well placed, how scientifically based, there is clearly some community concern. There was, after all, a Senate committee on wind farms. The Senate committee found that more research was needed. We responded through the department that we agreed with that. I think you are saying that even though the research is not very strong, no more research is needed. I think what the expert group has said is that in this area—and not with direct effects but indirect effects, where cause and effect is not known; the research was all-cross-sectional; the effects were all self-reported and so on— there are questions. We are here to improve community and individual health. This is an issue that was brought to us by the state health departments. I think it is important that we do not dismiss those concerns, we look at the evidence brought to us by the expert committee and then by the feedback and then make a decision.

CHAIR: Senator Di Natale, this is the last question, please.

Senator DI NATALE: I have only asked one question. I thought Senator Madigan had an opportunity to ask a few questions. I would like the same opportunity.

CHAIR: I am sorry, but if you want to debate the issue, that is different. You have had more than six minutes on this topic already, which is exactly what Senator Madigan had.

Senator DI NATALE: Are you concerned that, by concluding that more research is required, you may contribute to the fear and anxiety that exists around this issue because you are giving some succour to those people in the community who do hold those fears? Do you also hold concerns that every dollar spent in this area by the NHMRC is one less dollar that can be spent on cancer research or research into chronic disease and infant mortality across a range of conditions? Is that of any concern to you, Professor Anderson?

Prof. Anderson : We are certainly making our funding go as far as possible on important issues. The fact we call for research does not mean we will spend it, because we will need high-quality research. I remind you that there were similar concerns in this area around mobile phones earlier. It was only when very high-quality, long-term epidemiology research was done that we were able to dismiss those concerns.

Senator DI NATALE: Some people continue to have those concerns.

CHAIR: Thank you, Senator Di Natale.

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