

NUCLEAR ENERGY AND HEALTH AND THE BENEFITS OF LOW-DOSE RADIATION HORMESIS

J. M. Cuttler¹ and M. Pollycove²

¹ Cuttler & Associates Inc., Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

² School of Medicine, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA

Abstract

Energy needs worldwide are expected to increase for the foreseeable future, but fuel supplies are limited. Nuclear reactors could supply much of the energy demand in a safe, sustainable manner were it not for fear of potential releases of radioactivity. Such releases would likely deliver a low dose or dose rate of radiation, within the range of naturally occurring radiation, to which life is already accustomed. The key areas of concern are discussed. Studies of actual health effects, especially thyroid cancers, following exposures are assessed. Radiation hormesis is explained, pointing out that beneficial effects are expected following a low dose or dose rate because protective responses against stresses are stimulated. The notions that no amount of radiation is small enough to be harmless and that a nuclear accident could kill hundreds of thousands are challenged in light of experience: more than a century with radiation and six decades with reactors. If nuclear energy is to play a significant role in meeting future needs, regulatory authorities must examine the scientific evidence and communicate the real health effects of nuclear radiation. Negative images and implications of health risks derived by unscientific extrapolations of harmful effects of high doses must be dispelled.

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