

STUDY DESIGNS THAT MAY LEAD TO UNETHICAL RESEARCH OR THE INAPPROPRIATE INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS; ADDRESSING WHISTLE BLOWING

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Several stakeholders are involved in the discipline of Environmental Epidemiology and conflicting interests are regularly encountered by researchers and professionals working in this field. Guidelines are therefore needed to provide an ethical framework for environmental epidemiologists to help minimize ethical challenges when conducting research and when applying their knowledge in practice. In this symposium, presenters highlight these guidelines which are now revised to address more recent ethical challenges. In this presentation, two topics related to these guidelines will be addressed citing examples involving fellow epidemiologists. The first is study design as the responsibility of the epidemiologist. The design must enable researchers to test the hypothesis and association in question. An environmental epidemiologist has to decide on the most appropriate design, given all other factors of cost, feasibility, study power, and the ability to measure the exposure and outcomes. Study design will influence the quality of results, interpretation, and the impact the study may have on public health practice, education and policy. It therefore becomes unethical to conduct a study with an inappropriate study design that could lead to biased and invalid findings. This becomes further ethically unacceptable when these biases and weaknesses are not clearly described in the limitations of the study and its conclusion. Another important topic in environmental epidemiology is the persecution, discrimination, harassment and threats that fellow epidemiologist face when they become whistle blowers and report inappropriate institutional conduct or release important study findings that are being obstructed by their institutions. ISEE has clear guidelines on dealing with whistleblowers which has helped in support of such cases in the past. This presentation will engage the audience and provide the opportunity for discussion during the session by addressing the above points in light of the revised ethics guidelines and explicated through case studies.

(296 words)