

## IARC rejects false claims in Reuters article: WHO cancer agency “left out key findings” in benzene review

IARC strongly rejects the premise of the article published on 28 February 2018 by Reuters (WHO cancer agency “left out key findings” in benzene review). No key findings were left out of the IARC evaluation of benzene as a cause of cancer, and IARC provided extensive responses to Dr Kopstein’s questions. The article, which severely distorts the assessment of the IARC Monographs evaluation, is the latest in a series of misleading reports by Reuters. In the best interests of global public health and transparency, IARC is posting its full response to the journalist on its website, as it has consistently done.

Dear Ms Kelland,

Thank you for your continued interest in the IARC Monographs Programme. Please find below our comments and responses to your questions.

In the spirit of full transparency, we would like to inform you that your questions and our responses will be posted on the IARC website forthwith.

IARC has responded in detail to the points Dr Infante had raised in his commentary regarding the benzene Monograph in Vol. 100F (Cogliano et al., 2011). Contrary to your statement, Dr Infante’s concern was not about the exposure section of the Monograph, but about the evaluation of the epidemiological studies of populations exposed to benzene both in various industries and in the environment and any related cancer risk (Infante, 2011).

Regarding the Vol. 120 meeting of the IARC Monographs, Dr Infante had requested and was granted Observer status, and as such was given the opportunity to speak in this role at the meeting. We would also like to draw your attention to Dr Infante’s recent commentary in support of the IARC Monographs and published after the Vol. 120 meeting, in which he counters your earlier unsupported claims that IARC interfered with the Working Group’s evaluation of glyphosate ([Infante, 2018](#)).

Dr Kopstein’s commentary in *New Solutions* (Kopstein, 2017) expresses his personal views of how data on exposure to benzene and benzene-containing mixtures should be interpreted by IARC Working Groups. Dr Kopstein was not – and never requested to be – a Working Group expert, or an Observer. He expressed his viewpoint in a commentary, and viewpoints are not generally considered by the IARC Working Group, as per the Preamble to the IARC Monographs. A summary of the most pertinent data together with the evaluations and the rationale of the Working Group and key references are published in *The Lancet Oncology* (not in *The Lancet*) shortly after each meeting and before the full Monograph, which contains all the pertinent references.

Dr Kopstein expressed many of his same views in extensive private correspondence to the IARC Monographs Programme. Although some of this correspondence is cited in the commentary, Dr Kopstein does not mention that IARC responded to all of the scientific issues he raised. For example, IARC investigated the allegation that exposure data were taken from manufacturers’ Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS), and showed that it was not true. IARC explained this in the

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April 2015 email Dr Kopstein cites, so we find it surprising that he would repeat this false allegation, and others, in a published commentary despite our clarification.

Unfortunately Dr Kopstein tried to directly influence the 2017 IARC Working Group on benzene, in contradiction to IARC’s publicly stated policy. Lobbying members of the Working Group is not acceptable, as mentioned on the IARC website, which was reiterated in writing to Dr Kopstein.

For the sake of transparency, the contact by Dr Kopstein and IARC’s response were also announced to all participants at the opening of the Monographs Working Group meeting.

1/ In an email to Dr Kopstein in 2015, you told him that the exposure section on benzene in Monograph 100F was “condensed” and not intended to be “exhaustive.” Is it fair to say that you accept that the benzene exposure part of Monograph 100F has shortcomings?

There are no “shortcomings”. Benzene was evaluated several times by the IARC Monographs and remains a Group 1 carcinogen. In general, the exposure section of the IARC Monographs does not contribute to the overall evaluation of the agent. Therefore, the section on exposure is intended not to exhaustively review the existing literature, but to describe human exposure situations that are pertinent to the evaluation.

2/ What measures has IARC taken to address the complaints from Dr Kopstein about the exposure section on benzene in the 100F Monograph and to correct any errors or shortcomings?

IARC responded to all of the scientific issues Dr Kopstein raised. For example, IARC investigated the allegation that exposure data were taken from manufacturers’ Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS), and showed that it was not true. IARC explained this in the April 2015 email Dr Kopstein cites, so we find it surprising that that he would repeat this false allegation, and others, in a published commentary despite our clarification.

3/ Are you aware that the benzene section of 100F Monograph has been cited in litigation in the United States?

The IARC Monographs make important contributions to the scientific evidence base for cancer prevention and control. The Monographs may be used by the World Health Organization and other organizations in formulating guidelines, recommendations, and policies, and inform civil society. However, IARC does not recommend regulations, legislation, or public health interventions, and IARC has no control over the use of Monograph conclusions in litigation.

4/ Did the Monograph 120 working group consider the published commentaries by Dr Kopstein and Professor Infante during its deliberations? If so, why are they not referenced in the summary published in *The Lancet*? If not, why did the Working Group not take them into consideration?

Dr Kopstein’s commentary in *New Solutions* (Kopstein, 2017) expresses his personal views of how data on exposure to benzene and benzene-containing mixtures should be interpreted by IARC Working Groups. The Working Group of the Vol. 120 Monographs meeting considered all scientific articles eligible, according to the [Preamble](#) to the IARC Monographs. This includes

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original data published in scientific journals, but not commentaries and letters to the editor, because these are viewpoints. A summary of the most pertinent data used to make the evaluation together with the evaluations themselves and the rationale of the Working Group and key references are published in *The Lancet Oncology* (not in *The Lancet*) shortly after each meeting and before the full Monograph, which contains all the pertinent references.

5/ Are you and other senior IARC staff satisfied that the benzene Monograph 120 is based on a thorough review of the evidence on benzene exposure?

Yes, IARC, and the Working Group members, for that matter, stand fully behind the scientific integrity of the process and the evaluations of the Vol. 120 Working Group.

6/ Does IARC have any plans to send a representative to give evidence to the congressional committees investigating its operations?

IARC is accountable to its funders, its governing bodies, and the international scientific community. IARC has responded in detail to the questions posed and concerns raised by the House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology; these exchanges are available for you to consult on the IARC website.