



Understanding public responses to precautionary action and advice

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Overview

- MTHR project
- Public responses to precaution
- Focus group perspectives
- Survey perspectives
- Making sense of different stories



Communicating Uncertainty: MT Health Risks

- Dr Lada Timotijevic
- Prof Richard Shepherd
- Dr Vicky Senior
- Ms Jane Vincent



Project objectives

- Explore the perception of uncertain health risks of MT technology
- Explore the impact of precautionary approach to MT on understandings of risk, risk managers and upon behaviour
- Evaluate the current government strategy of communicating health risks of MT
- Propose ways of communicating and managing uncertain health risks associated with MT technology



Project structure

- Descriptive study: series of focus groups
- Survey: with ONS Omnibus Survey
 - Evaluation of Department of Health risk communication on MT risks
 - To establish baseline measures
- Development of self report measure
- Series of experimental studies
 - Systematically explore effects of uncertain risk communications



Precaution

- Precautionary approach for MT in the UK
- Content of precautionary approach for MT in the UK



MT Precaution in UK

- ..the gaps in knowledge are sufficient to justify a precautionary approach
IEGMP, Stewart Report, 2000
- The NRPB board believes that the main conclusions reached in the Stewart Report in 2000 still apply today and that a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phone technologies should continue to be adopted
NRPB 2004

Dimensions of precautionary approach



Advice to government

- exposure guidelines, planning requirements

Advice to industry

- SAR values, promotion of phones to children

Research requirements

- setting up research programme under independent committee

Public information

- leaflets

NRPB

- more open and sensitive to matters of public concern



Did public concern lead to precautionary approaches? (I)

Statement from Minister for Public Health, 1999

- To date there has been no consistent evidence suggesting risk to health but there is continuing public concern about the possibility. It would be wrong to ignore that concern. That is why, as champion of the public health, I believe we need a definitive and rigorous assessment of existing research .. so that the public can receive clear advice about the use of mobile phones...



Did public concern lead to precautionary approaches? (I)

Select Committee on Science and Technology Third Report, 2000

- In April 1999, the Minister announced that, in response to recent research publications, the now widespread use of mobile phones and "the heightened public concern about health effects from mobile phones", the NRPB had been instructed to establish an Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones



Did public concern lead to precautionary approaches? (II)

IEGMP/Stewart report

We recommend that national and local government, industry and the consumer, should all be actively involved in addressing concerns about possible health effects of mobile phones

Government response to the Stewart Report

The report makes helpful recommendations on measures to reduce public concern about the health impacts of MT technologies.



Do precautionary approaches reduce public concern? (I)

- Burgess (2003)
 - The precautionary principle itself can animate risk perceptions
 - The logic of 'no smoke without fire'
 - Precaution confirms and coheres diffuse anxieties



Do precautionary approaches reduce public concern? (II)

- Weidemann and Schütz (2005)

“Precautionary measures implemented with the intention of reassuring the public about EMF risk potentials seem to produce the opposite effect. They may trigger concerns and amplify EMF-related risk perceptions”



Focus group recruitment

- Nine focus groups
 - Five in London Borough characterised by media debate and public protest about mast siting
 - Groups defined by concern & involvement in protest
 - Four in Brighton – access to demographically heterogeneous population
 - Groups defined by age and phone use profile
- Focus group format
 - General discussion about MT, notion of precaution, specific precautionary actions/advice



Understandings of precaution

- Little evidence that participants knew about precaution; they provided evidence that 'care in face of uncertainty' was unlikely
- Ideas about what constitutes precaution very different from 'official' position
- Many sceptical responses to precaution – lack of accountability, allowing a later response of 'we did warn you at the time'



Concern or reassurance?

- Some evidence that precautionary approaches used to validate rather than initiate concern
- Sometimes raised other concerns – not about MT itself but (e.g.) other things people did not know, what might be withheld
- Some were reassured that government could show itself to be responsive in the face of uncertainty
- Concern/reassurance not key dimension



Validating concern

IV How does it make you feel that they have adopted...this strategy?

S It makes me think that we're right, then, with our concerns. If there were no concerns they would be presenting the evidence.

C We probably wouldn't be sitting here either.

J It's quite a harsh statement as well. It implies that something is actually wrong.

M But then it doesn't sit, does it? So, once again they say we won't do that, and all the figures are massaged. I do take your point about it being *all* governments, but I wouldn't believe anything this government says. If they said something was black I'd immediately believe it was white.



ONS Survey Questions

- 19 questions included in nationally representative ONS omnibus survey in Nov 2004
- Areas covered
 - Awareness of DoH leaflets and content
 - Types of uncertainty people are most concerned about
 - Trust in government that they will regulate this area effectively
 - Efficacy of public involvement in decisions about base station siting
 - Whether precautionary advice increases concern or reassures

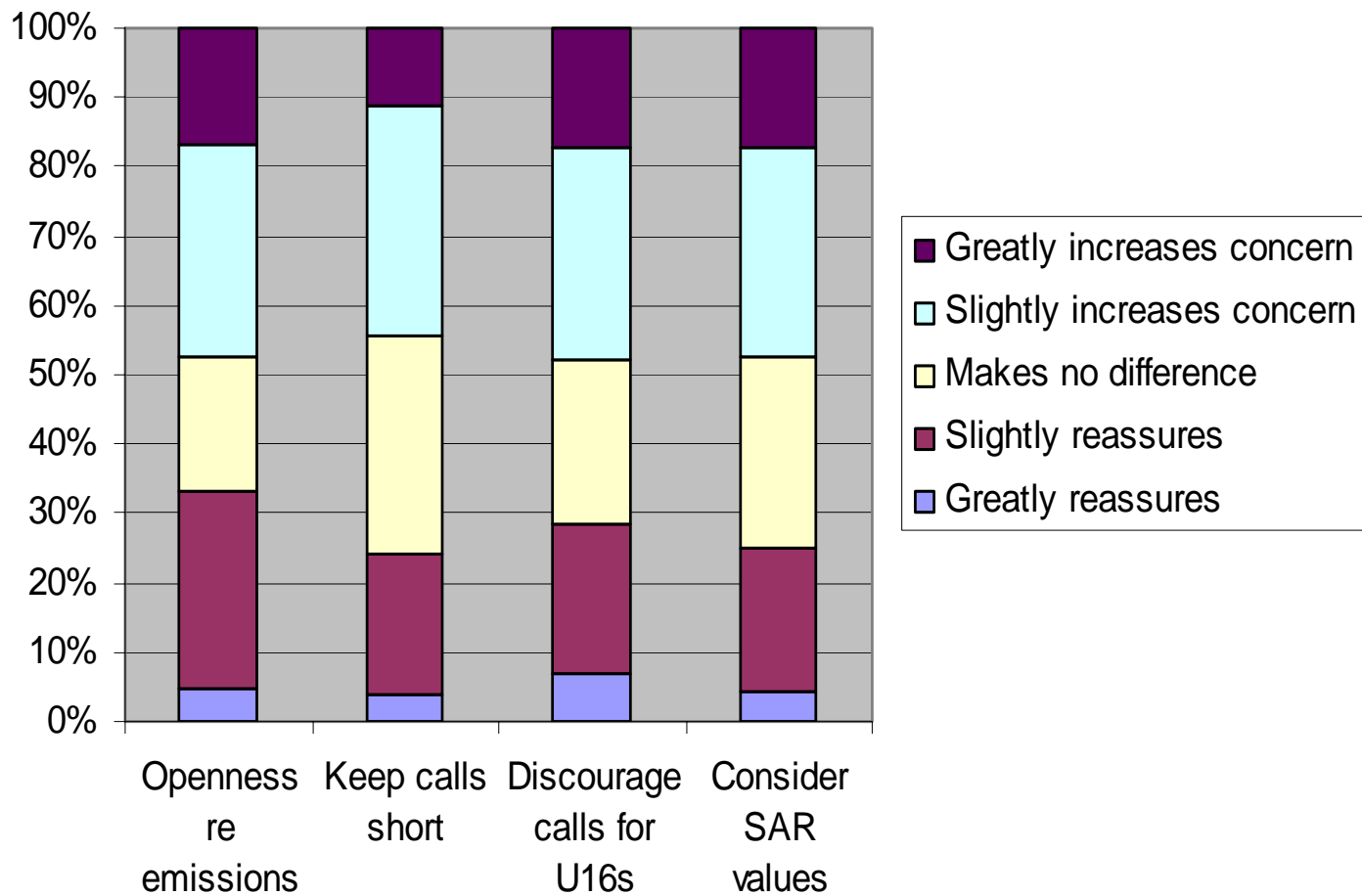


Precaution items in ONS survey

Government advice recommends that

- there should be greater openness with the public about the emissions from masts near schools
- that people should keep their mobile phone calls short
- that non-essential calls for those under 16 should be discouraged
- customers should consider relative SAR values when buying a new mobile phone

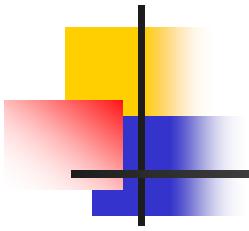
RESPONSES TO PRECAUTIONARY ADVICE/ACTION





Increase concern or reassurance? (I)

- Greater likelihood of objecting to masts is related to greater *concern* around *openness about mast emissions*
- Low frequency of phone use is related to being *reassured* by *advice to keep calls short*.



Increase concern or reassurance? (II)

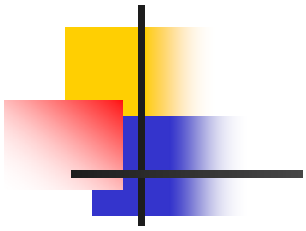
Those agreeing that

- Government provides all relevant information about health risk
- Government adequately regulates possible health risks associated with mobile phones

are more likely to see precautionary recommendations about

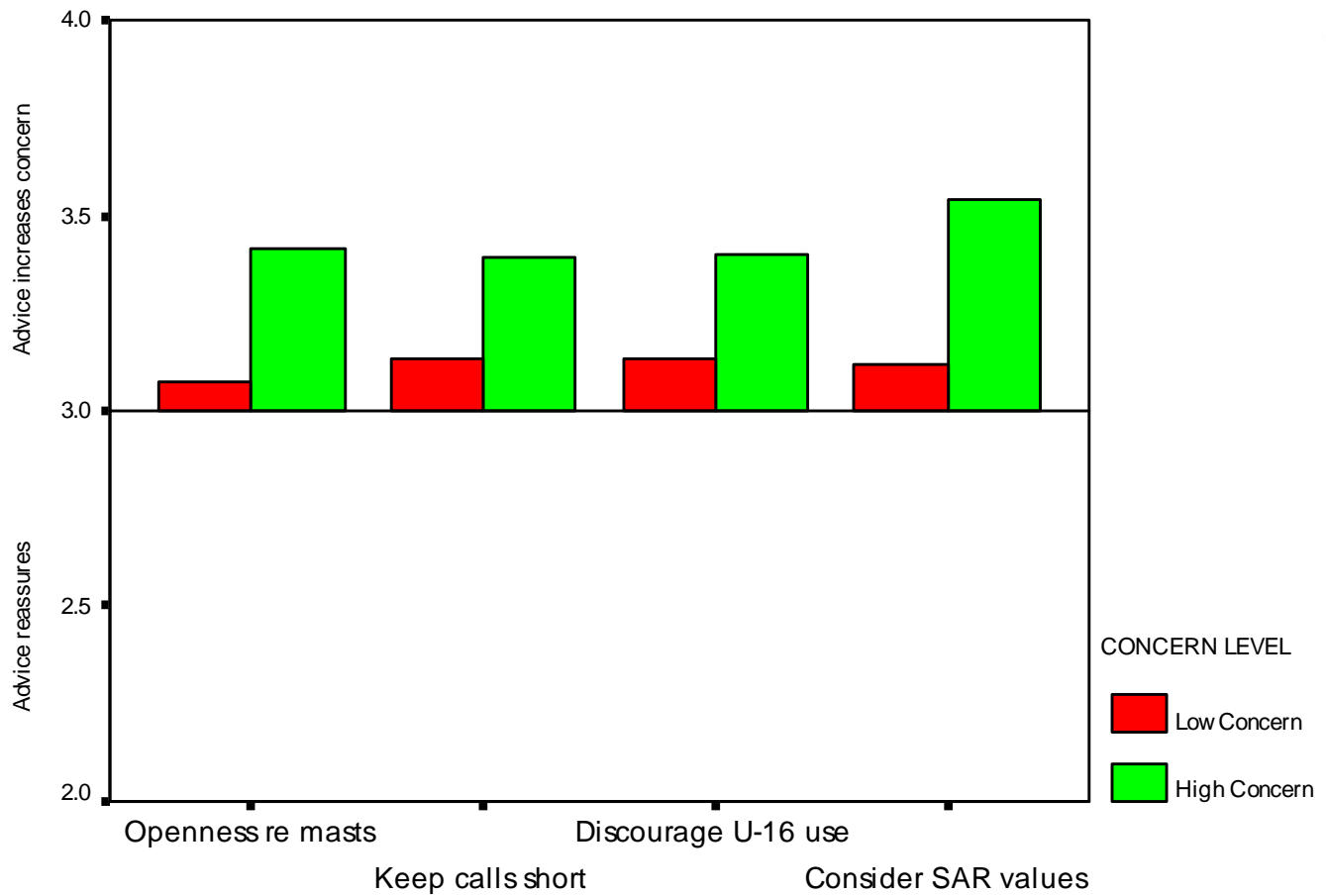
- call length
- SAR values
- limiting non essential use for U16s

as *reassuring*



RESPONSES TO PRECAUTIONARY ACTION

by CONCERN about UNCERTAINTY





Different stories....

- Different perspectives provided by survey and focus groups
- Common ground
 - Importance of initial position
 - Little evidence that precaution reassures
- Caution needed
 - Raised risk estimates associated with
 - Communication of uncertainty
 - Provision of information



Final thoughts

- Specific explanations
 - Precaution and risk conflated in survey; focus groups made sense of risks in context of benefits first?
 - Participants discounted concern in focus groups?
- Importance of understanding how, why and when people negotiate a focus on different facets of risk debates
- Other models of 'public' in relation to precautionary approaches