On the misuse, neglect, and nonsense use of epidemiology and effect measures in policy formulation

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Epidemiologic effect measures, even when perfectly valid, may be irrelevant for policy questions. Measures of health that reflect intervention and policy reality will be more complex and uncertain than those produced by typical, conventional analyses (including “causal inference” methods). Nonetheless, simple measures can reveal contextually absurd assumptions and violations of facts within apparently sophisticated narratives and methods. There is a pressing need for the academic community to critically examine what passes for “scientific” advice, and to criticize publicly both the flaws they discover and the policies and laws based on that flawed advice (as well as policies and laws based on no science at all).

Sander Greenland is Emeritus Professor of Epidemiology and Statistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. He specializes in research on epidemiologic statistics, theory, and methods and the limitations and misuse of statistical methods in observational studies. A Fellow of the American Statistical Association and the Royal Statistical Society, he has served as an associate editor for statistics and epidemiology journals, and as an advisor to numerous agencies including the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control, the State of California, and the National Academy of Sciences.

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