

## **Definitions Relating to (1) Suppression of Research (2) Repression of Research**

The Ethics and Philosophy Committee has discussed phenomena related to obstructing the conduct of a study or the release of its findings and the validity issues resulting from these phenomena. The Committee has also approached Dr. John Last, the Editor of the Dictionary of Epidemiology with a suggestion to add background and definitions of two epidemiologic terms: research suppression potentially leading to **suppression bias**, and research repression leading to **repression bias**.

We invite comments, critique, and suggestions concerning these issues in general and the form of the definitions in particular. Address comments to Raymond Neutra, Chair, Ethics and Philosophy Committee: [rneutra@igc.org](mailto:rneutra@igc.org).

### **Definitions Relating (1) to the Suppression of Research and (2) to the Repression of Research**

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-- February 11, 2002 --

#### **1. BACKGROUND:**

Research Suppression (or, oppression) is the act of obstructing the conduct of a study or the release of its findings. It is unethical when imposed for reasons other than the concern for scientific validity and objectivity. However, Ethics Review Boards/Institutional Review Boards do have the charge of obstructing the conduct of a study that they deem as unethical. Research suppression operates at the interest group level such as from government, industry, the scientific community, or by any other group or individual with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Suppression can be motivated, for instance, by financial or ideological interests that a topic not be researched or reported on, or even by professional jealousy. Such acts deny the fundamental principle of advancing scientific knowledge, namely that of research in pursuit of the public health interest. Research suppression can lead to: (1) an absence of evidence; (2) bias in a purported risk factor-disease association in the literature; and (3) a decrease in the precision of that association's estimate. Those serving to bring such acts or pressures to public view are considered to be whistle blowers.

#### **DEFINITION:**

**Suppression (or, Oppression) Bias** results when the act of obstructing the conduct or publication of research by a group or an individual with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo produces a bias in characterizing a risk factor-disease association. It is a subclass of

publication bias. Suppression bias undermines public health because it distorts scientific knowledge on health risks. In addition, it undermines public confidence in the objectivity of health authorities.

## **2. BACKGROUND:**

Research Repression is the act of not pursuing a line of enquiry because it does not conform to established interests or a dominant paradigm, or because of pressures, verifiable or not, to not pursue such a line of enquiry. Research repression may operate at the level of the individual researcher and, if so, is a form of self-censorship. As in research suppression, research repression can lead to: (1) an absence of evidence; (2) bias in a purported risk factor-disease association in the literature; and (3) a decrease in the precision of that association's estimate. Those serving to bring such acts or pressures to public view are usually social critics/commentators/philosophers (and not whistle blowers).

## **DEFINITION:**

**Repression Bias** results when the researcher fails to pursue a line of enquiry because, wittingly or unwittingly, he or she conforms to prevailing dominant social or research paradigms. It is a subclass of publication bias. Repression bias undermines public health because it distorts scientific knowledge on health risks. In addition, it undermines public confidence in the objectivity of health authorities.