

Why UCLA's Firing of a Lone Dissenting Voice Should Worry Us

December 05, 2011 By [Geoffrey C. Kabat](#)



In February 2010 UCLA epidemiologist James Enstrom was informed that he would not be reappointed as research professor – a position he had held for thirty-four years.

Although the department offered as a reason that his research was not “aligned with the department’s mission,” the decision -- taken at a closed meeting that excluded Enstrom -- appears anything but academic.

Enstrom is an established researcher who has conducted large studies in diverse populations to address important health issues. In the early 2000s he started doing research on fine particle air pollution and mortality at a time when the state of California was considering stringent new regulations of diesel emissions. His reading of his own results and those of his peers put him in direct conflict with a powerful nexus of scientists and policymakers involved in setting air quality standards.

In 2008 the California Air Resources Board, or CARB, proposed and approved new rules to reduce the diesel particulate matter portion of fine particle air pollution (PM2.5), which can penetrate deep into the lungs. In support of this goal, a 2008 CARB report claimed that 18,000 premature deaths per year in California were caused by breathing PM2.5.



Enstrom believed that CARB’s claim was not supported by the evidence. While major studies in the mid-1990s had shown a weak association nationwide of exposure to PM2.5 with mortality in the 1980s, several more recent studies, including Enstrom’s, have shown that this association was not significant in California. In fact, the evidence is consistent in showing no association of PM2.5 with mortality in California.

In addition, Enstrom has tried to put PM2.5 health effects in perspective by pointing out that California is a very healthy state, with the fourth lowest total age-adjusted death rate among the fifty states.

Enstrom felt that the enactment of additional stringent regulations should be based on an honest reading of the

scientific evidence, rather than one slanted to support a regulatory agenda. In addition, he argued that the broader consequences of the proposed regulations should be taken into account, including their impact on California's already depressed economy.

But he went further. He delved deep into CARB's regulatory process – something no one else had successfully done. What he found was a pattern of abuses, including a fraudulent Ph.D. of the lead author of the 2008 CARB report that provided the public health justification for the diesel regulations; failure of members of CARB's scientific review panel (SRP) to comply with the three-year term limit mandated by state law (two activist members of the SRP have served for over 25 years); and a pervasive tendency to interpret the evidence in a way that supported its position.^[1]

Due to Enstrom's persistence and outspokenness, five of the nine SRP members were replaced in 2010, and CARB was forced to modify its 2008 diesel regulations in 2010.

None of this activity has endeared Enstrom to powerful environmental activists at the University of California and CARB. Six senior members of Enstrom's department are involved in the diesel pollution issue, and UCLA's Southern California Particle Center has received tens of millions of dollars in research grants based on the contention that PM2.5 has an important impact on health. With his scrupulously-documented critique of air pollution epidemiology, Enstrom poses a threat to enormous vested interests.

It is in this light that the treatment of Enstrom by UCLA becomes intelligible. Although his position has been extended through June 2012, he has had to spend the past two years defending himself and has not been able to obtain new external funding to support his position and research. Also, he has never been allowed to present his work to his peers at UCLA.

Enstrom's experience, which he terms "Kafkaesque," raises pointed concerns about the politicization of science when it comes to high-stakes environmental and regulatory issues. When a proven scientist is silenced because his point of view conflicts with entrenched interests, and when the commitment to open debate, academic freedom, and due process are unceremoniously thrown aside, the result is not likely to be a well-grounded policy.

(Disclosure: I have collaborated with Dr. Enstrom on two scientific papers and can directly attest to the honesty and integrity of his research).

Geoffrey Kabat, Ph.D., is a cancer epidemiologist at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and the author of *Hyping Health Risks: Environmental Hazards in Daily Life and the Science of Epidemiology*.

^[1] Enstrom has meticulously documented every step in his attempt to obtain a hearing for the relevant science and has posted all relevant documents (including published papers, unpublished documents, correspondence, and public comments on the CARB review process) at www.scientificintegrityinstitute.org.