

International Agency for Research on Cancer



World Health
Organization

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CPW/mg

5 October 2016

Dear Dr Collins,

IARC Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans

The attached letter from the Chair of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is in the public domain (<https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-09-26-JEC-to-Collins-NIH-IARC-Funding-due-10-10.pdf>) and thus came to my attention.

For more than four decades the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the specialised cancer agency of the World Health Organization, has convened Working Groups comprised of world-leading scientists to evaluate the evidence for carcinogenicity of a given agent. The evaluations published in the IARC Monographs are widely respected for their scientific rigour, standardized and transparent process and for the freedom from conflicts of interest of both Working Group members and the IARC Secretariat. The Monographs are used by regulatory agencies, scientists and the wider public across the world.

The letter from Mr Chaffetz contains a number of points about the IARC Monographs which I would like to address for the sake of accuracy and to further inform the important considerations of the Committee:

- The IARC Monographs adhere to a clear set of procedures as defined in the publically available IARC Monographs Preamble (<http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Preamble/index.php>).
- The IARC Monographs is a hazard identification programme; risk assessments are left to national authorities or other international organizations, which may use IARC Monographs as part of their own processes.
- The IARC Monograph classifications relate to the **strength of evidence** that an agent is a carcinogenic hazard and not to the **magnitude of risk** associated with exposure: this is why different agents fall into the same classification. This distinction is made clear on the Monographs website (http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/News/Q&A_ENG.pdf).
- The IARC Monographs re-evaluate an agent when the scientific evidence significantly changes. In the case of coffee drinking, the previous evaluation as Group 2B "*possibly carcinogenic to humans*" was conducted in 1991. The report in 2016 was not a "retraction" but a re-evaluation based on an additional 25 years of scientific evidence.
- The IARC Monographs only evaluate agents for which there is evidence of human exposure and an existing body of scientific literature indicating a degree of carcinogenic hazard to humans. The non-random selection of agents explains why the evaluations extremely rarely find there is "*evidence suggesting lack of carcinogenicity*".

In light of your anticipated briefing to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, I am available to provide any additional information you may require.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'CP Wild', with a horizontal line underneath.

Christopher P. Wild, PhD
Director

ENCL.: Copy of letter from COGR Chair to NIH Director, dated 26 September 2016

cc: Dr Doug Lowy, Acting Director, US National Cancer Institute (dl60z@nih.gov)