Author's response to reviews

Title: Reporting individual results for biomonitoring and environmental exposures: Lessons learned from environmental communication case studies

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Author's response to reviews: see over
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To the Editors:

Thank you for the opportunity to revise our manuscript #3439684511890829, “Reporting Individual Results for Biomonitoring and Environmental Exposures,” for resubmission to Environmental Health.

We are delighted that the reviewers agree this work is of importance to readers. We have modified the manuscript in accordance with suggestions. The revised manuscript and a description of how we responded to reviewer comments accompany this letter.

EH frequently publishes studies that rely on biomonitoring and personal environmental exposure measurements, so we believe this article is equally important for your readers, because it provides researchers who lead these studies with important insights about evolving ethics and effective practices for reporting individual results back to their participants. In the past, researchers typically reported to study participants on their own chemical exposure levels only when the results exceeded one of the few existing clinical guidelines, for example for lead or mercury. However, as measurement methods expanded to test for many more chemicals with uncertain health effects, the practice of waiting for clinical relevance was called into question. We discuss the ethics and practice of making individual report-back the norm rather than the exception. The track-record from studies that have reported exposures is large enough now to provide examples, while many more teams are just beginning to think about these issues and seeking advice. We draw on our experience as early practitioners of personal report-back; our interviews with researchers, IRB representatives, and study participants; and discussions in a workshop of 44 stakeholders.

This manuscript has not been previously published and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All the authors have contributed substantially to the manuscript and accept responsibility for its contents. The authors declare that we have no competing financial interests.

We believe this work will help to update the ethical practice of environmental health research, strengthen exposure studies by enhancing relationships with participants and communities, and encourage new communications that will improve public understanding of environmental health.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Julia Brody, Ph.D.
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Response to reviewer Lisbeth E. Knudsen

Comment: The manuscript reports on considerations regarding individual reporting of biomonitoring and environmental exposure results. The text is elegantly structured from examples and reference is made to a number of relevant US studies.

Response: We appreciate this positive assessment and respond to specific comments below.

Comment: I recommend to include the list of recommendations developed and reported in the appendix 3 - handbook - in a table included in this publication.

Response: Thank you for this suggestion. We have added our recommendations summary from the Handbook as Table 2.

Comment: In these recommendations I miss the approach of reanalysis in case of odd (very high) levels to rule out analytical mistakes. I also miss the involvement of GPs, nurses or other resource persons that may be familiar to the health of the study family.

Response: We added both of these points (responding to ‘very high” levels and involving medical practitioners and other local leaders) to the recommendations in Table 2.

The description of the European ESBIO study is correct and it should be supplemented with the COPHES/DEMOCOPHES study that has actually been performed in 2011-2013 in 17 European countries, following a common protocol including individual feed-back of results. Reference may be made to Becker et al 2013

Response: We added this reference to the text on page 4 and included it as an additional entry in Table 1.

Response to reviewer Erin Haynes

Thank you for the positive assessment of our manuscript. We reply to detailed comments below.

Comments: Pg. 2, Abstract: spell out first reference to “IRBs” and two lines down abbreviate IRBs. Pg. 5, Ethics: Reference “Belmont Report.” Pg. 8, Paragraph 2: spell out MESH, what does that stand for? Pg. 8, Paragraph 2: fact sheet is two words. Pg. 10, Paragraph 1: Insert a comma between the words surprised and but.

Response: We appreciate the careful reading. We have made all of these changes.

Comment: Pg. 10, Paragraph 1: What were participants often surprised by; by receiving results?

Response: We have clarified this sentence to read as follows: “Participants were often surprised to learn that their bodies harbor chemicals from everyday consumer products, pollution, and even chemicals banned years ago...."
Comments: Pg. 10, Paragraph 2: Insert a comma between the words Study and as. Pg. 10, Paragraph 2: Spell out CYGNET, what does that stand for?

Response: We made these changes.

Discretionary Revisions

Comment: Pg. 5, Ethics: it may be helpful to the reader if the Belmont Report was described or referenced in a phrase or sentence.

Response: We added a citation to the Belmont Report and briefly describe it in a new sentence.

Comment: Pg. 6, Informed consent: A short description of the history of informed consent may benefit readers. For example, when was it first used and why did it come around to benefit participants?

Response: We added a clarifying sentence about informed consent and very briefly note that it arose from past abuses and is intended to ensure that participants understand research protocols, risks, and benefits. We wanted to keep this short and expect that many readers are familiar with the history of informed consent from human research ethics trainings.

Comment: Pg. 7, Designing report-back: Evaluation techniques; Are there any that apply to report-back methods or is that up to the discretion of the researcher?

Response: We added on page 7 that the Report-back Handbook has examples of evaluation instruments as well as results. We also refer to larger literatures on health and environmental communication that offer useful methods. We believe there is a great deal more work to be done to design increasingly advanced evaluation methods, so we also added reference to evaluation in the “future needs” section. Report-back evaluation methods could be the subject of another paper.

Comments: Pg. 9, Designing report-back: In some cases and in particular communities, media can be used to the advantage of the researcher. Media can be used to announce information about general report-back information and gain (hopefully positive) study promotion. Pg. 9, Paragraph 2: Participants can also benefit from community meetings addressing report-back result questions and information.

Response: Yes, we agree. We added a sentence on page 9 that references news media and community meetings. Community meetings and news media are also addressed in the Handbook. These are important topics that we hope to return to in another paper as well.

Comment: Pg. 9, Paragraph 2: What current online methods is Silent Spring developing; a website, newsletter, or interactive web page?

Response: We added that we are developing an interactive web page that will have the capability to personalize individual results.
Response to the editors comments:

Response: We have modified the title to include a study design and made the requested formatting changes. Please let us know if we have overlooked anything.