

# Robert Becker, 84, Raised Concerns Over Power Lines

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By [STEPHEN MILLER](#), Staff Reporter of the Sun | June 11, 2008

Robert Becker, who died May 14 at 84, helped define the study of bioelectricity and spearheaded early opposition to high-voltage power lines because of suspicions about health effects.

A professor of surgery at the State University of New York's Upstate Medical Center and chief orthopedist at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Syracuse, Becker studied the effects of radiation on bodies as well as the action of electricity within them. He used electric stimulation to regenerate limbs in salamanders and demonstrated a similar effect in rats. The hope was ultimately to regenerate limbs and spinal cords in humans.

Having noted that solar flares sunspots could wreak havoc on radio communications, Becker wondered if they could affect the mind. He found that the flares had a positive correlation with admissions to state mental hospitals.

It was at Environmental Protection Agency hearings in 1975 over a New York State Power Authority plan to run a 765,000-volt line from Utica to Massena, N.Y., on the Canadian border, that Becker announced his opposition on health grounds. Becker and one of his students, Andrew Marino, said that they had found various irregularities in rats exposed to high-voltage electromagnetic fields (EMFs). Their findings meant that no one should be within 100 yards of high-power lines, they testified.

Becker later appeared on "60 Minutes" to raise more concerns, but his visibility on the issue ended his other scientific studies because he questioned the objectivity of the National Academy of Sciences, according to Mr. Marino. Becker's grants were canceled. "Regeneration studies were effectively killed," said Mr. Marino, now a professor in the department of cellular biology and anatomy at Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

Robert Otto Becker was raised in River Edge, N.H., and attended Gettysburg College and the NYU School of Medicine. He completed a residency in Hanover, N.H., and served in the Army medical corps in the early 1950s. In 1956, he joined the SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse.

Concentrating on the body's electrical systems, Becker's research verged into unorthodox arenas, including acupuncture, visualization, and hypnosis. He served as associate editor of the series "Advances in Parapsychology," and delivered a keynote lecture at a 1990 meeting of the American Society for Psychical Research titled, "The Relationship Between Bioelectromagnetics and Psychic Phenomena."

But it was his more orthodox, if not generally accepted, ideas about the threats posed by pervasive EMFs that are his main legacy. He published two books on the topic, "The Body Electric" (1985, focusing more on therapeutic regeneration) and "Cross Currents: The Promise of Electromedicine, the Perils of Electropollution" (1990).

He suspected EMFs in cancers, as a cause of Attention Deficit Disorder and even road rage. "The greatest polluting element in the earth's environment is the proliferation of electromagnetic fields," he said in 2000. EMFs have been in the news recently as suspicion once again falls on cellular phones. When using a cell phone, he once said, "You are irradiating parts of your brain. There's no question about this."

He lived in recent years in Lowville, N.Y., on the edge of the Western Adirondacks.

"He's the reason nobody wants to live near power lines," Mr. Marino said.

His wife, three children, and two grandchildren survive him.