

Life is too cheap, says expert

Oliver Moody Science Correspondent

The government values human lives at as little as a tenth of their real worth, researchers say.

From NHS decision-making to the regulations imposed on nuclear power plants, many branches of the state estimate the worth of preventing a single death at £1.83 million. This figure is often used to work out how much should be spent on measures against accidents and is said to have been used in cuts in the rail safety budget.

It is, however, based on a "flawed" reading of a survey carried out 20 years ago that involved only 167 people, a study argues. Philip Thomas, professor of risk management at the University of Bristol, and Ian Waddington, a software engineer, say the "one-size-fits-all" number is unuseable.

"If stated preferences are to be

believed, the public wants a VPF [value of a prevented fatality] that is ten times the current value, at between £16 million and £22 million," they wrote in the magazine *Nuclear Future*.

The method behind the present number is so flimsy that it leaves the government vulnerable to challenges in the courts, they added. It also fails to take into account that all deaths are not treated alike in the real world: a fatal road accident is regarded very differently from a lingering death from cancer brought on by radiation.

Professor Thomas called for a new model, which calculates the public's beliefs about the value of human life from the insurance markets and other economic data, and would set a single life at about £7 million, close to the sum used by the US government. "I think it will be difficult for regulators to continue business as usual," he said.

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