Ethics of experimenting with people’s lives in winter backcountry

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The purpose of the Avaluator Avalanche Accident Prevention Card, designed by Haegeli and McCammon (2006) and published by the Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA), was to reduce the number of avalanche accidents in Canada. Speaking to the ISSW 2006 audience, McCammon (October 3, 2006) announced an experiment on the Avaluator’s effectiveness: “This is an experiment. This is an experiment with people’s lives, with their loved ones.” Subsequently, we (Uttl et al., 2008a,b; 2009a,b,c,d) have shown that (1) the data behind the Avaluator are not available for inspection, (2) Haegeli and McCammon inappropriately excluded 1,148 avalanche records (82% of their sample) due to missing data, (3) the Obvious Clues prevention values in the Avaluator are grossly inflated, and (4) the number of accidents in Canada doubled following the introduction of the Avaluator. The two new disclaimers in the latest printing of the Avaluator (2009) advise that the Avaluator’s Obvious Clues Method is not suitable for “any particular purpose” and that the Canadian Avalanche Center (CAC) is not responsible for any “injuries or death” or other damages caused by the Avaluator. Inexplicably, the CAA and CAC continue to claim that the Avaluator is “the best tool” and have not recalled it. We asked over 100 individuals how ethical various actions taken by the developers, CAA, and CAC (e.g., not recalling it) are. The participants rated the actions as nearly extremely unethical and believed that the developers, CAA and CAC should “tell the truth” and recall the Avaluator.