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Canada offside with world on cell tower issue

BY SARAH SCHMIDT, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE APRIL 2, 2009



Health Canada says the government's limits of human exposure to electromagnetic fields and radio frequency radiation, set in 1999, adequately protect Canadians, including children, so no European-style warning on cellphone towers is necessary.

Photograph by: Gerry Kahrman, Canwest News Service

The European parliament voted overwhelmingly on Thursday to push for tougher regulations to keep mobile phone towers and other electromagnetic emitting devices away from schools and to limit cellphone use for children and teenagers because of the "continuing uncertainties about the possible health risks."

Key parts of the newly endorsed report, backed by 559 of 581 parliamentarians, puts Canada offside with a growing number of international bodies raising concerns about a possible link between wireless technologies and devices and certain types of cancers, including brain cancer.

Health Canada maintains the government's limits of human exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMF) and radio frequency radiation, set in 1999, adequately protect Canadians, including children, so no warning is necessary.

Noting the use of cellphones has become common place for children as young as 10 as "an object serving a practical purpose and as a fashion accessory," the newly adopted report by the European Parliament raises special concern over young people "whose brains are still developing."

The international body representing 492 million people from 27 countries also voted to "draw attention" to the recent "appeal for caution" from Canadian epidemiologist Elisabeth Cardis, co-ordinator of the Interphone study, the largest research project organized by the International Agency

for Research on Cancer studying 6,400 cellphone users with cancer.

The European parliament's report notes that Cardis, "in light of existing knowledge, recommends, as far as children are concerned, that mobile phones should not be used beyond reasonable limits."

In the short term, the parliament is calling on the commission to review "the scientific basis and adequacy of the EMF limits" because "the dispute within the scientific community regarding the potential health risks arising from EMFs has intensified" since the limits were set in 1999. The report also notes that in the absence of "definite conclusions" from the scientific community, China, Russia and at least nine members states of the European Union have already lowered allowable exposure limits based on a "preventive" model.

In a statement issued Thursday in the wake of the vote, Health Canada said it is constantly reviewing the scientific literature to make sure Canada's Safety Code 6, which establishes exposure limits. The limits, last revised in 1999, remain "current and valid," the department said.

"Based on information to date and the weight of evidence from ongoing scientific literature reviewed by Health Canada scientists, the department is confident that the exposure limits specified in Safety Code 6 remain current and valid."

Health Canada didn't comment specifically on the "appeal for caution" put forward by Cardis, but the federal agency said its safety code's "built in margin of safety" means the limits for public exposure apply to everyone, including children.

"The limits set out in Safety Code 6 also protect frequent users of cellphones as they assume non-stop usage — 24 hours a day, seven days a week — which is not typical of Canadian cellphone use. As well, tests were performed at peak power levels. Cellphones typically operate at much lower levels."

However, Health Canada said "parents concerned about their children's RF exposure may wish to take extra precautions by limiting the use of cellular phones by their children."

That's not good enough for Sharon Noble. She and her husband received assurances from municipal and federal officials a few years ago that Safety Code 6 would protect them adequately before they purchased land and built on Triangle Mountain in Colwood, nearly Victoria.

Their home is located within 100 metres of two towers with a total of 140,000 watts and within one kilometre of 45 transmitters, said Noble. She attributes a high concentration of health problems among neighbours to the transmitters.

"It should say to Health Canada 'open up your eyes,'" Noble said of Health Canada's position in the face of international pressure.

"The United States and Canada are just about the worst in the world. With all the other countries reacting the way they are in trying to come up more with protective devices and guidelines, Health Canada will not talk about it. They say there's no credible evidence."

Britain, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Israel, Russia and India advise that children should limit their use

of cellphones. France is moving to make it illegal to market cellphones to children under 12, while Russia recommends children under 18 not use cellphones at all.

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