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Swedish Expert Group Ignores Cell Phone Links to Tumors

March 14... The **Interphone** saga gets weirder and weirder. The latest chapter comes with the release, earlier this week, of a status report on EMFs and health by the Swedish Radiation Protection Authority (**SSI**).

Recent Research on EMF Health Risks, the fifth annual report by an independent expert group, covers what was learned about various types of EMFs, from ELF to RF, in 2007. Here we address only what it says about the latest Interphone results—or more precisely, what it does not say.

For reasons that we cannot begin to understand, the group headed by **Anders Ahlbom** of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm never mentions what is arguably the most important cell phone study published last year: the Lakhola study, an analysis of the Interphone data from five northern European countries. It points to a long-term risk of a brain tumor on the side of the head the phone was used. (See our **post of January 22, 2007**.)

It is impossible that the SSI panel did not know of this meta-analysis. The second author of Lakhola, Anssi Auvinen of Finland's University of Tampere, is a member of the panel, and the Karolinska's Maria Feychting, another Lakhola coauthor, is its scientific secretary. Indeed, Ahlbom is himself associated with the Interphone project and could hardly be unaware of Lakhola.

The Lakhola study was posted online on January 17, 2007—at the very beginning of the year. For a moment, we thought it might have been included in last year's SSI **report**. Not so.

Nor was the Lakhola paper the only Interphone study to be ignored by the SSI committee. The **French** and **Israeli** papers were also somehow left out. Both indicate a possible long-term tumor risk. (We do allow that the Israeli study was published in December when this report was being finished, though we suspect that Auvinen and Feychting as members of the Interphone project would likely have been aware of those results and the fact that they would soon be published.)

The panel did cite two new Interphone studies—a **German** one on acoustic neuroma and **Norwegian** one on brain tumors. Neither showed an elevated risk.

Why were the three Interphone papers suggesting cell-phone tumor risks shunted aside while those showing no risks included? Is this about the power of money to keep the lid on the cell phone health debate? Is this about political interference?

Whoever or whatever is responsible, it goes much deeper than Sweden's SSI. Of the seven members of the panel, five have strong ties to **ICNIRP**: Three are members of the commission (Ahlbom, U.K.'s **Richard Saunders**

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and France's **Bernard Veyret**), and two others are members of its standing committees (Finland's **Jukka Juutilainen** and U.S.' **Leeka Kheifets**). The report is a reflection of the leadership of the EMF community and it indicates a need for change.

But first, we need an answer to the question: How could these studies have possibly been ignored?

Neurosurgeon's Brain Tumor Warnings Cause Media Stir

April 10... Vini Khurana hit the big time last week. The Australian neurosurgeon parlayed a 69-page **literature review** on cell phones and brain tumors into a spot on the U.S. **NBC Nightly News**. Call it the power of the sound bite.

The centerpiece of Khurana's report is his prediction that cell phone radiation would turn out to be a worse public-health disaster than either smoking or asbestos. On March 27th, the *Canberra Times*, his hometown newspaper, wrote it up under the headline, "**Mobiles May Be a Death Sentence**." This prompted some chatter among EMF bloggers, but the big break came the following Sunday when the U.K. *Independent* ran its own story: "**Mobile Phones 'More Dangerous than Smoking'**."

Equating cell phones and tobacco is indeed provocative since we all know that smoking is a killer while the jury is still out on the health risks associated with using a hand-held phone. In fact, this was not the first time a major British newspaper had drawn a parallel between the two. Last year the *Times* asked, "**Could [Mobile Phones] Be the Cigarettes of the 21st Century?**" The question may have been rhetorical, but the *Times* left nothing to the imagination. "Absolutely," it added.

The *Times* story was definitely noticed, but it was the *Independent* that touched a nerve. Minutes after the Web editors at the *Independent* posted the story, it became one of the lead stories on the "**Drudge Report**," a favorite among those in search

of the latest hot news and gossip. It didn't take long for Khurana's warning to become the #1 most popular story (most read and most e-mailed) on the *Independent's* Web site. It was still on the list, albeit at #10, a week later. In the meantime, hundreds, if not thousands, of other publications and Web sites repeated the claim that using a cell phone might be worse than smoking.

Few American newspapers went along, but on April 3, Bob Bazell, NBC's chief science correspondent, aired an interview with Michael Thun of the American Cancer Society on the *Nightly News*. The ACS has long maintained that the link between cell phones and cancer is nothing more than a "myth" (see *MWN*, **M/J03** and **August 3, 2007**), yet this time Thun allowed that there is some "legitimate uncertainty" over what might happen following long-term, cell-phone use. (At this writing, the segment is still on the **NBC News** Web site, under "Health.")

Bazell was skeptical at best. Citing unnamed U.S. "experts," he dismissed Khurana's conclusions as "absurd" and concluded that there is "no evidence of danger." Nevertheless, he closed his piece with a precautionary hedge against the unknown. "It's never a bad idea to use your earpiece to get the antenna away from your head," he advised.

Why did Khurana's report get so much more media play than, for example, the **BioInitiative Report**, which offers a much more detailed analysis of EMF health risks by some of the leading researchers in the field? Part of the reason is that Khurana is a brain surgeon and it is only natural for people to think that he would know about brain tumor risks. (Hey, it *is* brain surgery!) That his report offers little that is new may have been missed by those who never ventured beyond the "Key Messages" in its first few pages.

Another way to think about it is that the episode offers another lesson on the vagaries of what becomes news. Few can predict what stories will catch the public's imagination, though a provocative sound bite always helps. Yet, a receptive audience is an important part of the equation. One sure lesson of the Khurana episode is that the public, even though enamored by cell phones, has a latent concern about the long-term risks.

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Another Interphone Researcher Warns of Cell Phone Risks

April 28... Another **Interphone** researcher is expressing concern over the tumor risks associated with the long-term use of mobile phones. "I think the evidence that is accumulating is pointing towards an effect of mobile phones on tumors," Professor **Bruce Armstrong** of the University of Sydney School of Public Health told "**TodayTonight**," an Australian current affairs show on Channel 7, a national network.

"I would not want to be a heavy user of a mobile phone," Armstrong said. "People might be shocked to hear that the evidence does seem to be coming more strongly in support of harmful effects."

The ten-year Interphone data has clearly changed Armstrong's outlook. A few years ago, he told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that "there is no consistent evidence that there is an increased risk of cancer," but even then he allowed that "it could be 15 years before we see an effect."

Armstrong, who is leading the Australian component of the Interphone project, is the second principal investigator of the 13 country teams to urge precaution. Last December, Siegal Sadetzki of the Chaim Sheba Medical Center in Israel told *Haaretz*, a national newspaper, that, "The time is past when it could be said that this technology does not cause damage; apparently it damages health."

Neither the Australian nor the Israeli results on brain tumor or acoustic neuroma risks have yet been made public. Sadetzki has reported a significant increase of parotid gland tumors after ten years of cell phone use. Her **paper** appeared in the February 15th issue of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*.

Meanwhile, the final Interphone paper is still not finished. Just a few days ago, Elisabeth Cardis, who leads the overall Interphone study, told *Microwave News* that she hopes that the combined results from all 13 countries will be submitted for publication "in the not too distant future." Cardis recently left **IARC** to join the Center for Research in Environmental Epidemiology (**CREAL**) in Barcelona.

The nine-minute piece also features an interview with Chris Zombolas, the technical director of **EMC Technologies**. In measurements commissioned by the TV show, Zombolas found that a number of cell phones do not meet the 2 W/Kg SAR standard when placed in a pocket and used with a hands-free set or a Bluetooth transmitter. The worst of the four phones tested was a Nokia **E65**. Zombolas measured an SAR of 3.35 W/Kg at 1800MHz and an SAR of 5.84 W/Kg at 2100MHz. The Australian SAR standard is 2 W/Kg.

[As of May 4, the TodayTonight segment, "Health Fears over Mobile Phones," can no longer be viewed on the program's **Web page**; only a brief **synopsis** is now available. **Next-Up**, the European activist group, has posted the complete **video** on its Web site.]