More RF Research in the U.S.? Don't Hold Your Breath

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Don't hold your breath waiting for the U.S. to do more research on the possible health effects of mobile phones.

After sitting through two and a half days of briefings at this week's National Academy of Sciences workshop in Washington, we walked away thinking that it's unlikely that the academy's report, due by the end of the year, will put a high priority on initiating any new projects. The panel would have to make some strong recommendations to prompt action because, at the moment, the federal government has neither the will nor the money to revisit the RF-health controversy. For its part, the cell phone industry has long argued that it wants health research to come to an end.

Attendance at the meeting told the story. Other than the invited speakers and a couple of representatives from the federal agencies, just a handful of people bothered to show up. The wireless industry mostly skipped it —Motorola's Joe Elder was one of the few exceptions. The press also took a pass. Only three people spoke at the sessions reserved for public comments; two raised concerns over phone towers. The third, Dave LeGrande of the Communications Workers of America, addressed occupational health risks. None of the comments from the floor made a case for more studies on cell phones.

America's declining standing in RF research was apparent by who was invited to speak at the workshop. Of the 19 presentations, only seven were from the U.S. In contrast, Finland, with a population of just over five million, contributed two speakers, as well as one of the panel members.

If no new projects are recommended and funded, the only RF research that will be carried out in the U.S. in the foreseeable future would be the animal studies sponsored by the National Toxicology Program. These were first put on the agenda eight years ago, and the actual cancer experiments are scheduled to get underway

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about a year from now. This is a major effort, costing a total of $22 million. About a third of this has already been spent on building the exposure systems, according to David McCormick of IITRI in Chicago. He is the running the study and is also a member of the NAS panel. Some at the meeting privately questioned whether we should be putting all our research funds in one basket.

The one wild card that could change this bleak research outlook is the long-delayed Interphone study. Two epidemiologists who are working on Interphone spoke at the meeting, but both were tight-lipped about the results. In separate interviews, they each refused to say anything about the observed long-term risks. Dan Krewski of Canada's University of Ottawa predicted that the Interphone paper would be out by the end of the year, while Anssi Auvinen of Finland's Tampere School of Public Health suggested that next year was more likely. Neither would say what is holding up its release, though it is becoming clear that the disagreements within the Interphone study team are about more than just copyediting.

If the final paper were to reinforce the already-published partial results, which point to a higher incidence of brain tumors and acoustic neuromas among those who have used phones for more than ten years (see, for instance, our January 22 post), the current agenda could well be revised. As FDA's Abiy Desta, who helped organize the meeting, told us, "All interested parties will pay attention to Interphone."

National Academy of Sciences, David McCormick, IITRI, Abiy Desta, Joe Elder, CWA, David LeGrande, Daniel Krewski,

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