BioInitiative Working Group: Show Us the Interphone Data

December 5, 2008

As the seemingly endless wait for the Interphone results drags on and on —the feud over the final results is now entering its *fourth year*— the BioInitiative Working Group is proposing a different approach: Each of the five participating countries that have not yet published their own data, either singly or in groups, should do so as soon as possible. The message is clear: If the members of the Interphone project cannot agree on how to interpret the combined results from all 13 countries, let others give it a try.

On December 3, the 11 members of the working group asked the lead Interphone epidemiologists in Australia, Canada, Israel, Italy and New Zealand for their "cooperation in publishing your study results in the very near future." This, they wrote, "will enable scientists and other experts not directly involved in the Interphone studies to get the whole pattern of results without further delay." (Download the letter, including the members of the working group, who were authors of last year's BioInitiative Report, see our post of August 29, 2007.)

We checked, once again, with Elisabeth Cardis, the project coordinator, and she confirmed that the Interphone team had not preempted the new BioInitiative plan. The results have not been submitted for publication, Cardis told us. This time, when we asked when they might be sent to a journal, we didn't even get the stock answer —"soon"— we have come to expect. Consensus appears to be as far off as ever.

Here's another bad sign: We are hearing talk that some Interphone researchers, who are convinced that the increased tumor risk found among long-term users is spurious, are now saying the whole project is so flawed that the final results should never be published.

And another: The battle for public opinion is being waged in the press instead of scientific journals. In Sweden for instance, Inger Atterstam, a science and medical columnist for *Svenska Dagbladet,*

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a conservative and influential daily newspaper, wrote on November 24 that there is no reliable evidence to support a link between cell phones and cancer, or any other health risk. Why then do so many Swedes think there is a tumor risk? Atterstam blames Lennart Hardell and Kjell Hansson Mild —two members of the BioInitiative Working Group— as well as the tabloids, notably *Aftonbladet,* which, she says, love to run alarmist headlines to juice up circulation.

Atterstam must not have read the published papers or even their abstracts because they do show a tumor risk. Atterstam is repeating what she is hearing from her sources, most likely the Karolinska group, about which she has written approvingly in the past. Early last year, when five Northern European countries, including Sweden, reported a statistically significant increase among long-term users, Atterstam shunted this finding aside and advised that, all in all, there is no cancer risk and that there's nothing to worry about. She even took a swipe at the journal that published the paper, calling it second-rate. Here again, she attacked Hardell and Mild as "alarmists" and *Aftonbladet* for trying "to exploit people's fears to sell more newspapers." These views mirror those of Karolinska's Maria Feychting and her mentor, Anders Ahlbom, who both openly disparage Hardell's work. Feychting is one of the Interphone investigators who are convinced that their own results are too flawed to be taken seriously. The overlooked irony is that the findings of the Hardell and Interphone groups are consistent with each other; they are seeing approximately the same level of risk among long-term users.

We agree with the BioInitiative Working Group that all the Interphone data should be published, either in a journal or on the Internet —the sooner the better. But we would go a step further. All Interphone principal investigators should be barred from receiving research funds from the EC or their national governments until the final results are available to all. After all, if Interphone is as flawed as some participants claim, why should they be given any more money to mess up any more studies.

A lot of public money has been spent on Interphone and the public should have the results.

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