"Scientific American" vs. Lady Gaga

September 28, 2010

Who offers better scientific advice: Lady Gaga or *Scientific American* ? Okay, it's a trick question. Sometimes Lady Gaga does make more sense.

Two items crossed our desk this morning. A dispatch from Next-Up, the European EM activist group, under the title "Lady Gaga Says No to Radiation from Mobile Phones." That in turn was based on an August 31 story in the U.K. *Sun* newspaper —admittedly not one of the most reliable sources of news, but then again this is not a complicated story. "Mobiles Send You Gaga," warned the headline (don't miss the *Sun's* accompanying photo of Lady G. in her retro phone hat). Citing a "source close to the star," the *Sun* reported: "Even though there's no firm evidence, it's really freaked her out. One of her team has to hold the phone so it isn't too close to her head. She then listens on the phone loudspeaker." That's one way to practice precaution, at least for those lucky enough to have an assistant always at the ready.

A few minutes later, a friend e-mailed us a column by Michael Shermer, the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, which appears in the October issue of *Scientific American* (p.98). According to Shermer, "Physics shows that cell phones cannot cause cancer." What physics? Apparently, the well-known fact that microwaves don't have the quantum energy to break chemical bonds. This is the same tired argument cited just about every week by physicist, now rabid blogger, Robert Park. (Disclosure: Park writes nasty things about *Microwave News* and its editor Louis Slesin, often messing up the most basic facts about who we are and what we do.) Another skeptics' magazine (how many are there?), the *Skeptical Inquirer,* ran a long piece, "Power Line Panic and Mobile Mania", late last year making the same general argument.

Yes, yes, yes, we can all agree that microwaves are too weak to disrupt molecular bonds. Can we now please move beyond that? We have been covering this topic for decades, with special

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emphasis on the possibility that power-frequency EMFs and cell-phone radiation may lead to DNA breaks. Yes, again, *not* break them directly — but perhaps *by inhibiting the repair process.* We all know —or at least we should— that DNA breaks are common events in human biology. What would happen if the repair mechanisms that can usually fix the breaks no longer work? In the end, there isn't much net difference between breaking a bond and failing to repair an already broken bond. Either way, you end up with potentially compromised genetic material.

A couple of years ago, a news article in *Science* magazine also claimed that cell phone radiation could not break DNA. When we and others pointed out that there was a large body of work in the peer-reviewed literature showing that microwaves could indeed affect DNA, *Science* conceded that the matter was far from resolved. (For our coverage of the *Science* dispute, click here.)

The possibility that microwaves can lead to more broken bonds does not tell us whether they can lead to brain cancer or other types of tumors. But as long as physicists and those pretending to know some physics continue to confuse the issue, we will never move forward to that key question. Then again, that might be the whole point of promoting all this misinformation.

Score one for Lady Gaga.

Scientific American, Lady Gaga, cell phones, cancer, Science,

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