2014 Short Takes

Reliability of Swedish Brain Tumor Data Questioned

Are Rates Actually Increasing?

October 20, 2014
Updated April 16, 2015

Some leading epidemiologists have been saying that cell phones don't pose a brain tumor risk because cancer rates are not going up. Now comes word that Swedish cancer registry data are in disarray and official statistics may be masking a disquieting trend.

Since 2008, there has been a close to 30% increase in patients with a brain tumor of an "unknown nature" and that increase is not reflected in the national cancer registry, according to a new analysis by Mona Nilsson, a Swedish journalist and the chairman of the Swedish Radiation Protection Foundation.

Nilsson reports that the number of Swedes who died of a brain tumor of an unknown nature rose by 157% between 2008 and 2013. And among those younger than 70, the increase was even "more pronounced" — there were 82 such deaths in 2013, compared to only 7 in 2008. Yet, Nilsson adds, "the number of patients reported dead of brain tumors with a confirmed diagnosis declined" during that same period.

To further support her suspicion that the official brain cancer rates are not to be trusted, Nilsson points to "huge disparities" in brain tumor rates between different regions in Sweden. For instance, the rate among men in Stockholm was 8.99 per 100,000 while in Gothenburg the rate was 15.19 per 100,000. Nilsson points out that there has been a parallel "steep increase" in the number of people treated for brain tumors of an unknown nature in the Stockholm region.

"The Gothenburg region discovered underreporting problems some six or seven years ago and took measures to improve the reporting. That's why the incidence in Gothenburg is much higher, nearly

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double, that in the Swedish capital region and probably better reflects the real situation," Nilsson said in an interview.

The news from Sweden comes as rumors are swirling that the cell phone industry is pressuring IARC to revisit its 2011 decision to classify RF radiation as a possible human carcinogen. In response to a query, Nicolas Gaudin, IARC's head of communications, told *Microwave News* that he is "not aware of any such plans."

Joachim Schüz, a senior manager at IARC, is one of those who points to stable cancer rates as an indicator that cell phones are safe (see "IARC Tries To Play Down Cell Phone Tumor Risks"). Schüz was previously with the Danish Cancer Society and is a coauthor of the Danish cohort study that shows no increased cell phone–tumor risks.

Nilsson's analysis follows last year's still unexplained report of what has been called a "frightening" spike in aggressive brain tumors among Danish men. (See our report: "Something Is Rotten in Denmark.")

Last spring, a French study found a higher rate of brain tumors among heavy users of cell phones, supporting similar indications from IARC's Interphone study and the work of the Hardell group in Sweden.

April 16, 2015

Lennart Hardell and Michael Carlberg have written up many of Nilsson's concerns in a paper published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (open access). They conclude that, "a large part of brain tumors of unknown type are never reported to the Cancer Register," and that the Registry is therefore "is not reliable to be used to dismiss results in epidemiological studies on the use of wireless phones and brain tumors."

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25 Years Later: Same People, Same Controversy

The New York Times Looks Back… And Then Gets Slammed

July 8, 2014
Updated July 19, 2014

Today's *New York Times* revisits the EMF controversy, with reporter Kenneth Chang looking back at a Science Times story about power-line EMFs and cancer that ran in July 1989.

Both now and then the *Times* quoted David Carpenter. Here's what he said in 1989: "The whole thing is very worrisome. We see the tips of the iceberg, but we have no idea how big the iceberg is. It ought to concern us all."

This is what Carpenter told Chang for the update: “Almost nothing has changed in 25 years in terms of the controversy, although the evidence for biological effects of electromagnetic fields continues to grow stronger.”

The only other person interviewed for the new story was Emilie van Deventer of the WHO EMF Project in Geneva, who said, in part: “I am calling you, talking to you using my cell phone. I have a microwave. I have everything. It doesn’t change anything for me. But from a professional point of view, it’s important that we stay on top of it.”

July 18, 2014

There is a disheartening postscript to this story.

Soon after the *Times* story appeared Geoffrey Kabat, an epidemiologist, who claims to be able to detect pathological science when he sees it, posted a comment on the *Forbes* magazine Web site slamming the *Times* for “reviving baseless fears.” Here’s part of what he wrote:

> “The *New York Times* does its readers a disservice when, in the guise of updating a highly-charged issue, it features someone whose alarmist mantra has not changed in 25 years, but who ignores a mountain of accumulated evidence amassed over that time period.”

Kabat’s comments might have passed unnoticed outside the business community but today Faye Flam, a columnist for a Web site that tracks and critiques science journalism, based at MIT, joined in with an even more strident attack on the *Times* and on Carpenter. Flam charged that the *Times* made “the same mistake twice.” Not only should the newspaper not have run Chang’s piece a few days ago, but it shouldn’t have published the original piece back in 1989.

Then Flam went weird. After mistakenly describing Carpenter as a cancer epidemiologist (he’s an MD neurophysiologist), she told her readers what kind of scientist Carpenter really is:

> “The new story revisits Carpenter, who hasn’t changed his mind. He’s still concerned about the threat of electromagnetic fields. People with fringe ideas rarely recant, whether their belief involves cold fusion, alien abductions or ESP.”

How’s that for character assassination! Flam went on to offer her own tutorial in pathological science.

To add a dash of salt in Chang’s wound, Boyce Rensberger, a former *Times* science reporter who works for the same outfit as Flam at MIT, commented that Chang had done a “true disservice to *Times* readers,” adding, “What we want to know in a look-back is not whether one zealot has changed his mind but … what the latest science says.” Surely, that was Chang’s point: There is very little new science.

We [Louis Slesin] posted our own comment, calling Flam's piece "bewildering and disappointing, at best."

Freaky or What?

Parallels Between INTEROCC and INTERPHONE

June 30, 2014
Updated November 25, 2015

INTEROCC and INTERPHONE have a lot in common —more than their first five letters. So much in common that it's a bit freaky. Or, maybe it just shows, once again, how small, insulated and polarized the EMF community is.

The most obvious parallels are that Elisabeth Cardis is the principal investigator of both the INTERPHONE and the INTEROCC projects, and that much of the data used in INTEROCC was collected by INTERPHONE in its original questionnaires. Some, but not all, of those who are working on INTEROCC were also part of INTERPHONE. Among them are Martine Hours and Siegal Sadetzki, who have stated publicly that the INTERPHONE results justify precautionary policies, as has Cardis.

The conflicts that brought INTERPHONE to a standstill for years, might have caused similar delays for INTEROCC. Sweden's Maria Feychting, an INTERPHONE skeptic who doubts the observed links between cell phones and tumors, was slated to work on INTEROCC when the project was first announced in 2007. But she later dropped out. Similarly, Italy's Suzanna Lagoria, who sides with Feychting on INTERPHONE, was also part of the original INTEROCC project and she quit too. One notable exception is IARC's Joachim Schüz, another INTERPHONE skeptic, who *is* a coauthor of the new INTEROCC paper.

Strikingly, a number of those who doubt the link between cell phones and brain tumors seen in INTERPHONE, have also lined up against a link between power-frequency EMFs and brain tumors.

The most widely cited work used to rebut a cell phone-brain tumor association is the Danish Cohort Study, led by Christoffer Johansen at the Danish Cancer Society (see our appraisal). There's also a Danish cohort study of electric utility workers, and Johansen is in charge of that too. As with cell phones, Johansen's utility cohort shows no excess of brain tumors (see our INTEROCC story).

Another leading doubter of cell phone tumor risks is Peter Inskip of the National Cancer Institute (NCI). (Inskip famously stormed out of the IARC RF cancer review in 2011, just before the panel designated RF as a possible human carcinogen, see our report.) Here again, the parallels are eye-opening. Inskip is a senior author of NCI's 2009 paper exonerating ELF EMFs of any association with brain tumors.

And then there's David Savitz, who wanted to share the "good news" that workers in the electric utility industry face no brain tumor risk, even though his own study shows otherwise. In a commentary on INTERPHONE, Savitz joined Feychting and U.K's Tony Swerdlow, another leading Interphone naysayer, to downplay —if not dismiss— the idea that INTERPHONE points to a brain tumor risk: "The trend in the accumulating evidence is increasingly against the hypothesis that mobile phones can cause brain tumors in adults," they wrote after the INTERPHONE paper appeared (this was an official ICNIRP opinion). The following year (2012), Savitz left no doubt that he fully agreed with his ICNIRP colleagues, stating under oath, "My interpretation is that … [INTERPHONE] really provided to me fairly clear evidence against the likelihood of [any major health effects]."

Freaky or not, it's time for some fresh blood in EMF/RF research.

INTEROCC: What About Cell Phones?

Maybe It Was Never RF, But ELF

June 30, 2014

The new INTEROCC paper raises an intriguing question: Might the ELF component of GSM phone radiation present a brain tumor risk?

To date, all the attention on the cancer risk from mobile phones has been on RF radiation. Now that INTEROCC points to a credible association between exposure to ELF EMFs and brain tumors (see main story), is it possible, we have been focusing on the wrong type of phone radiation all along?

GSM phones expose the user to ELF EMFs because the RF transmitter in the phone turns on-and-off 217 times a second.[1] The radiation from old analog and the newer 3G or 4G phones have much less ELF, if any at all.

Since the INTEROCC data was collected in the INTERPHONE study (see "Freaky or What?"), phone use data would have been available. Yet, phones are not discussed in the INTEROCC paper. "At the very least, they should have mentioned the ELF from phones," Alasdair Philips of Powerwatch told us from his home in Scotland. Philips points out that, at the time the INTERPHONE data was collected, most people were using GSM phones.

Joe Bowman of NIOSH told us that phone use was not included in the INTEROCC exposure assessment. We then turned to Elisabeth Cardis who was in charge of the project. Here's what she said: "There appears to be little association between mobile phone use and occupation history in the study thus the potential for confounding is small." She added that, "The study included patients from a substantially increased age range for whom the detailed phone indices have not been derived."

1. See, for instance, Figure 4 in this 1997 Danish paper.

Bill Guy, "Father" of SARs, Dies at 85

April 24, 2014

Arthur W. Guy, known to all as Bill, died on April 20th at the age of 85. Guy will be best remembered as the leading proponent of the use of specific absorption rates (SARs) as a way of measuring the radiation dose associated with RF/MW exposure.

Guy received a doctorate in electrical engineering in 1966 from the University of Washington, Seattle, and then joined the UW faculty where he remained until his retirement in 1991. He stayed active as a consultant over the next 15 years. He served as a prominent science advisor to the cell phone industry's research program, known as WTR, run by George Carlo in the mid-1990s.

Guy founded the Bioelectromagnetics Research Lab at UW in 1974, with the assistance of Jim Lin. (Today, Lin serves as the editor-in-chief of the journal *Bioelectromagnetics*.) During the early 1980's, Guy ran one of the first studies to investigate the effects of lifetime microwave exposures on rats. The Guy study, as it became known, was prompted by public concerns over a powerful radar — called PAVE PAWS— being built by the U.S. Air Force on Cape Cod. The study was controversial from the start, and became even more so when, to many people's surprise, it showed that microwaves could promote cancer (see our report from 1984).

Guy played a decisive role in the development of RF exposure standards. He was the chair of the panel that wrote the 1982 ANSI standard, the first for which numerical limits were set as a function of the SAR and thereby changed with frequency. (This is the origin of the well shape in the graphic of RF exposure limits.) He served on a number of panels of the NCRP, including its first to recognize SARs (Report No.67). He later chaired the NCRP committee that wrote the influential report on RF effects and exposure limits (Report No.86). An effort to revise it a decade later, under the direction of Lin, was sidelined by lack of funding.

Henry Lai, who had joined the lab in the early 1980s, kept it going for a time after Guy retired, but it faded away as research money dried up.

C-K. Chou, one of Guy's doctoral students at UW and later a post-doc in his lab, became the director of Motorola's RF Dosimetry Lab in Plantation, FL and was later named Chief EME Scientist at Motorola Solutions. (Chou retired from the company last year.) "He taught me to speak the way it is, because that was what he did," Chou *told Microwave News.* "I learned from him 'experiments must be repeatable and explainable'."

A memorial service will be held in Seattle on May 9th.

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