

WHO funds mobile phone-cancer study

Australia has been invited by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to participate in a \$100 million four year epidemiological survey beginning this September, to evaluate claims that mobile phones cause brain cancer. Canada, France, Israel, Italy, Norway, Sweden and Denmark will also participate in the study, which is being coordinated by WHO's International Agency for Cancer Research in France.

The initiative was announced in December in Geneva, following a meeting of representatives from 17 countries specially convened to look at available

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research on the issue.

Head of the WHO's Electromagnetic Fields (EMF) Project, Michael Repacholi of the Royal Adelaide Hospital, explained that the aim of the study is to provide public health officials worldwide with a considered risk assessment of mobile phone use, based on sound scientific evidence. "If there is a risk we want to know how big [it is] so we can balance that with the benefits that come from the technology," he said.

It is hoped that the study will resolve long-standing scientific disputes about the connection between cancer and EMF. Repacholi is the Australian scientist involved in the controversial mouse study published last May, which was the first to demonstrate a link between mobile phones and cancer. But Repacholi's collaborator on the project, Tony Basten, Executive director of the Centenary Institute of Cancer Medicine and Cell Biology in Sydney, says the effect is probably not valid for humans. "We live in a field of [EMFs], the sources of which vary enormously: from high energy radar, mi-

crowave ovens, mobile phones, power lines, the earth's magnetic field and your own heart," Basten told *Nature Medicine*, "and there is no obvious reason why exposure to this sort of naturally occurring energy should have a dramatic effect on cancer rates." The experiment, which showed a 50 percent increase in lymphoma in mice exposed to EMFs, was conducted on genetically engineered animals that are highly susceptible to developing lymphoma.

Australian concerns were ignited further

by a December letter to the Australian Medical Journal from a Perth cancer specialist, claiming that a significant rise in brain cancers in Western Australia between 1982 and 1992 (from 6.4/100,000 to 9.6 for men and 4.0/100,000 to 6.5 for women) was probably attributable to the increased use of mobile phones.

The Australian government has also allotted AU\$4.5m (US\$2.9m) for research into the health effects of mobile phones during the next four years.

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