

Can cellphone use lead to cancer?

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Twelve million Canadians use cellphones — and that number is growing by the day. So many people use cellphones that you would have thought the fears about cellphones and brain tumours had disappeared.

But — quietly — a huge international agency has been gathering evidence, trying to answer the question: can cellphone use lead to cancer?

A decade ago, there was a lot of buzz that the radiation from cellphones can lead to cancer. A Florida man went to court, arguing that his wife's brain cancer was the result of prolonged use of cellular phones.

A number of studies had been conducted — some said there was a link, others found no connection.

Health Canada decided there is no conclusive evidence of a health risk from cellphones. In the U.S., a much bigger project is underway.

In 1997, scientist George Carlo headed up the Wireless Technology Research group in Washington. He had spent \$28 million U.S. over six years. But because his research group was funded entirely by members of the cellphone industry, it's dismissed as a big public relations job.

Carlo insists there is no proof of a health risk, supporting what becomes sort of a message track from the cellphone industry — from people like Roger Porier of the cellphone lobby.



"The overwhelming evidence from the scientific community — these are the top people in the world who are investigating these things — conclude time after time there are no adverse health effects in fields of this nature."

But Carlo, who was once the cellphone industry's hired gun, has morphed into one of the industry's biggest critics. Carlo's afraid there is a possible health threat. He thinks we should be told.

What's changed?

Carlo says the scientific research the cellphone industry paid him to oversee, turned up some problems.

"Is it absolute definitive proof? No, does it raise red flags of concern among public health people? Absolutely."

Carlo says research on rats found cellphone use could lead to genetic damage, which some argue, could lead to cancer. He says another small study on humans showed an increased tendency of tumours among cellphone users.

Carlo reported his findings to the industry and recommended it warn the public.

"When they found that we had findings of genetic damage and increasing risk of cancer they cut off our money completely."

Carlo's studies were shelved — and so was he. He's now trying to apply a little scientific research to the game of golf.

"Those of us who are no longer auditioning for future funding can be a lot more outspoken than folks worried about the next grant coming down the line."

But Carlo does have a tell-all book for sale. He's sold the rights to Hollywood. In the book, he accuses the cellphone industry of major spinning — of downplaying the science it doesn't like and supporting research it does like. People end up, Carlo says, thinking cellphones are all right.

Emphasizing the positive is a lobbyist's job, but Carlo says the cellphone industry has been doing a lot more than that. He says it's been lobbying prestigious scientific bodies to do a study that will make fears about cellphones and cancer go away. And what could be more prestigious than an agency of the United Nations and the World Health Organization?

International Agency for Research on Cancer

For almost forty years, we've relied on the International Agency for Research on Cancer to help us live our lives. The Lyons, France based agency tells us what causes cancer — so it affects what we eat and drink, how we work and how we build our homes.

We go to meet the people who put the labels on everything from saccharine to asbestos to second hand smoke. When you hear something labelled possibly or probably carcinogenic, odds are it got the label from IARC. Now IARC is looking at cellphones.

For the past six years, scientist Elisabeth Cardis has been overseeing the IARC cellphone study.

"What we have tried to set up is a study in which we gave ourselves all of the chances to find an effect, if it exists," Cardis said. "The risk of cancer is not very high at the individual level, but if you multiply by a billion users around the world, that could mean hundreds or thousands of cancers around the world...so it's obviously important to determine whether there's a risk and how big that risk is."



The IARC study is looking at more than 5,000 cellphone users with brain tumours in 13 countries, including Canada. It's looking to see if they used their cellphones differently than the rest of us. This type of epidemiological study has been done several times before but has always been criticized — either as not long term enough or not specific enough to find any conclusive link to cancer. Cardis says this study will be different.

"We have designed a study which going to overcome a lot of these limitations."

But George Carlo says the design of the IARC study is sure to make the cellphone industry happy.

"The cellphone industry thinks this study is the last nail in the coffin," Carlo said. "They're going to say that this is the biggest study that's ever been done in a dozen different countries, all the top scientists, and the findings are going to come out and say that everything is fine for consumers."

Carlo says the study itself is flawed because it will be biased toward finding nothing.

"We don't want to be saying these scientists are corrupt because they're not. But they have limited data and they make limited interpretation that they have limited data. The sum total of that is that consumers believe they are being taken care of when in fact they are not."

Keeping science clear of the kind of industry influence George Carlo talks about has always been a concern at IARC. Lorenzo Tomatis saw it during his 23 years there — 12 as the agency's director.

"It's always been on a razor blade, it was always difficult to be completely independent."

But now Tomatis criticizes IARC for being too open to industry pressure.

"Perhaps there is less attention on the side of IARC in checking the influence that comes from outside."

Tomatis' concern about IARC's independence stems from its recent ruling on another controversy.