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Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel

was in this conference :

Report from EHE '06 Conference 27-29 April 2006

Attendance:

An estimated 150 people from around the world were meant to attend the conference in Madeira, Portugal. In actuality about 100-120 people attended, mostly from Europe and the UK. Many presenters did not attend and someone that I spoke to said that at least 50% of presentations that he wanted to hear were cancelled to due lack of attendance.

Most participants were either academics, researchers, from technology companies or representatives of governmental bodies/authorities. Apart from myself and one other woman, there was no representation from NGOs or the environmental sector.

Content:

The general focus of the conference was scientific/technological. There were Plenary sessions, which were attended by all participants. The keynote speaker was Professor Paulo Vecchia, the chairman of ICNIRP. Other Plenary speakers were the vice-chairman of ICNIRP,

1. Plenary Session Conclusions

Professor Paulo Vecchia presented a general overview of the current international situation. His first point was that there needs to be a harmonisation of EMR standards and guidelines throughout Europe and around the world, based on ICNIRP standards. This is especially true for exposure guidelines for workers (a topic heavily discussed).

The second conclusion, and one repeatedly stressed, was that no causal/biological link has been proved between EMF and morbidity. Numerous research studies were presented by Prof Vecchia and other plenary session presenters, which all stressed the point that no clear scientific proof exists to confirm a theory often presented in epidemiological studies. It is important to note that I felt the scientists in attendance did not seem to place too much value on these epidemiological studies. Numerous problems were mentioned with them which warranted their lack of consideration. In summary Prof Vecchia stated that "RF fields can not be established as carcinogenic causes".

Furthermore, the vice-chairman of ICNIRP presented an extensive range of short-term lab tests carried out on humans who were exposed to limited radiation levels from mobile phones. From these lab experiments no evidence was found of biological changes in the patients. When questioned regarding the fact that there was a problem with assessing the acute exposure of low level radiation from mobile phones verses the chronic exposure represented in epidemiological studies, no satisfactory answer was provided. It was repeatedly mentioned that until clear biological and scientific evidence exists, no one was willing to say with any conviction that EMR caused ill health effects.

The adoption of a precautionary approach should be carefully considered as according to Prof Vecchia, "setting precautionary limits may create confusion and generate more public concern". He continued to

say that the costs, risks and impacts of EMR must be carefully assessed and balanced with other environmental hazards and what society is willing to accept.

The issue of public confusion, lack of knowledge and information was raised. Prof Vecchia expressed the need to put risks into perspective, whilst another plenary session presenter stated that “concern, fear, anxiety and confusion pose more of a risk than EMR”

2. Other Session Conclusions

Most of the other sessions focused on the presentation of new technology to measure and assess exposure and research. There were a limited number of case study presentations, the most relevant being that of Eva Marsalek. She works at an Austrian environmental organisation which champions the issues of public participation specifically with respect to EMR. They are based at the Vienna University.

Other case study presentations included

- German Telecommunication Research program
- Residential sources of exposure to Power Frequency, UK
- Sao Paulo, Brazil

All these presentations were very interesting and highlighted what was happening in other countries. All these presentations however were made by governmental bodies, and there was no pure environmental representation.

General Conclusions:

After conversations with some of the participants, there was a strong feeling that the conference was a bit of a white wash. No conclusions were reached (other than the need for more research), and there was a definite sense that plenary session speakers were trying to assure participants that no scientific proof existed. In addition, the blame was being directed at other possible causes, such as the thermal effects of radiation rather than EMR itself, nutrition and that public confusion had fuelled the flames of panic. The need to educate the public and adopt a clear precautionary approach was not discussed sufficiently.

Two aspects which were discussed extensively were setting clear exposure guidelines for workers and the issue of hypersensitivity to EMR by specific groups of the population.