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The Swerdlow reports: downplaying the mobile phone cancer risk

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In November 2011, a paper was published in *Environmental Health Perspectives* that gave ICNIRP's opinion on the findings of the Interphone studies. Written by members of ICNIRP's Standing Committee On Epidemiology, led by Anthony Swerdlow *, the paper, titled; "[Mobile Phones, Brain Tumours and the Interphone Study: Where Are We Now?](#)" concluded that "although there remains some uncertainty, the trend in the accumulating evidence is increasingly against the hypothesis that mobile phone use can cause brain tumours in adults."

* Anthony J. Swerdlow, Maria Feychting, Adele C. Green, Leeka Kheifets, David A. Savitz, International Commission for Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection Standing Committee on Epidemiology

Another bite of the apple

Professor Swerdlow, this time as chairman of of the UK's Independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation (AGNIR), within the Health Protection Agency, has released a new 333 page report that goes much further than his earlier dismissive ICNIRP paper.

Titled "[Health Effects from Radio Frequency Electromagnetic Fields](#)" this report is good news for both the telecommunications industry, shareholders in the industry and ICNIRP. Among its [key findings](#) are the following:

* The report finds that although a substantial amount of research has been conducted, there is no convincing evidence that RF field exposure [from all wireless devices- wi fi, mobile phones, base stations, TV masts, etc.] below internationally agreed guideline levels...[i.e. ICNIRP] causes health effects in adults or children.

* The evidence suggests that RF field exposure below guideline levels does not cause symptoms in humans and that the presence of RF fields cannot be detected by people, including those who report being sensitive to RF fields.

* A large number of studies have now been published on cancer risks in relation to mobile phone use. Overall, the results of studies have not demonstrated that the use of mobile phones causes brain tumours or any other type of cancer.

* As mobile phone technology has only been in widespread public use relatively recently, there is little information on risks beyond 15 years from first exposure. It is therefore important to continue to monitor the evidence, including that from national brain tumour trends. These have so far given no indication of any risk.

* Studies of other RF field exposures, such as those at work and from RF transmitters, have been more limited but have not given evidence that cancer is caused by these exposures.

* Research on other potential long-term effects of RF field exposures has been very limited, but the results provide no substantial evidence of adverse health effects; in particular for cardiovascular morbidity and reproductive function.

Professor Anthony Swerdlow, Chairman of the Group, concluded: "There are still limitations to

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the published research that preclude a definitive judgment, but the evidence overall has not demonstrated any adverse effects on human health from exposure to radiofrequency fields below internationally accepted guideline levels."

The importance of controlling conflict of interest.

As AGNIR is a supposedly "independent" organisation it would seem obvious that the chairman would need to have no ties with the telecommunications industry. After all, look at what happened to Anders Ahlbom when it was found that he had links with industry.

Quoting from Microwave News:

"The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has removed Anders Ahlbom of the Karolinska Institute from its panel of experts which is set to evaluate the cancer risks posed by mobile phones. The committee will meet in Lyon, France, for a week beginning this coming Tuesday, May 24. In an e-mail sent out earlier today, Ahlbom wrote, "IARC has excluded me from the RF Working Group because of 'possible perception of conflict of interest'."

IARC moved quickly after learning that Ahlbom is a director of his brother's consulting firm, Gunnar Ahlbom AB. The company, which is based in Brussels, the European capital and a center for lobbyists, was established to help clients on telecom issues, with an emphasis on environmental and energy regulations. Ahlbom failed to mention this sideline in his "Declaration of Interests" that is required of all those who participate in IARC cancer assessments."

With the UK's Health Protection Agency (HPA), however, allowing Swerdlow to head AGNIR while having a similar conflict of interest (below) is apparently not seen as a problem, even though numerous peer reviewed and published research papers have illustrated that industry/research conflicts of interest can bias the ability to objectively evaluate the scientific literature. This significant problem was addressed by Committee of Medical Journal Editors in November 2003 in their "Uniform Requirements", to quote in part:

"Conflict of interest exists when an author (or the author's institution), reviewer, or editor has financial or personal relationships that inappropriately influence (bias) his or her actions. . . The potential for conflict of interest can exist whether or not an individual believes that the relationship affects his or her scientific judgement. Financial relationships . . . are the most easily identifiable conflicts of interest and the most likely to undermine the credibility of the journal, the authors, and of science itself."

Even Michael Repacholi admitted as much in the May 2001 Australian Senate Inquiry hearings when he stated: *"There cannot be someone on the [ICNIRP] working group who is having an influence on health effects for an industry when they derive benefit from that industry."*

The proverbial "Elephant in the room"

Perhaps with the HPA, having a conflict of interest is not considered a problem. Perhaps its even an unwritten job requirement? As for that elephant that goes unnoticed, Swerdlow "holds shares in the telecom companies Cable and Wireless Worldwide and Cable and Wireless Communications" and that his wife "holds shares in the BT group, a global telecommunications services company." <http://ehp03.niehs.nih.gov/article/fetchArticle.action?articleURI=info%3Adoi%2F10.1289%2Fehp.1103693>

AGNIR's all-clear on mobile phones and brain tumours seems a bit premature considering the high level of uncertainty with the causes of this disease. According to the [Australian NSW Cancer Council](#):

- * Despite having a fatality rate of almost 100% brain cancer remains the least understood of all the cancers. Its the biggest cancer killer of young people...
- * Risk factors for brain cancer are unknown and there is no screening procedures in place.
- * Brain cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in children aged under-10, accounting for one third of all cancer deaths in this age group.

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- * Brain cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in children aged under 15 years.
- * Brain cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in people aged 0-39 years ...
- * Brain cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in females aged 0-44 years (behind breast cancer)
- * Brain cancer is one of the most understudied of all cancers yet receives very little research funding.
- * Brain cancer strikes adults and children alike, with the incidence highest in adults in the prime of life.
- * Brain cancer carries the highest individual financial burden of all cancers with an average cost more than 5 times higher than for breast or prostate cancer.

Conclusion

In order to maintain its scientific credibility with the public, the Health Protection Agency should follow the lead of the IARC and remove Swerdlow from his position as Chairman of AGNIR, to be replaced with someone who has no known financial ties with either the telecommunications or power utility sectors.

[« Microwave News introduces its new web site.](#)

[A report on the London Childhood Cancer conference »](#)

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