

Brain cancer fears over heavy mobile phone use

Asher Moses

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A top Australian neurosurgeon says the world's heavy reliance on mobile phones could be a greater threat to human health than smoking and even asbestos.

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Vini Khurana, who conducted a 15-month "critical review" of the link between mobile phones and malignant brain tumours, said using mobiles for more than 10 years could more than double the risk of brain cancer.

He has called for "immediate and decisive steps" by industry and governments to reduce people's exposure to invisible electromagnetic radiation emitted by handsets.

Dr Khurana also called for a "solid scientific study" observing heavy mobile phone users for a period of at least 10-15 years.

"It is anticipated that this danger has far broader public health ramifications than asbestos and smoking, and directly concerns all of us, particularly the younger generation, including very young children," Dr Khurana said in a research paper published on the website brain-surgery.us.

In a phone interview Khurana clarified the statement, saying he was not implying smoking was better for people than using mobile phones, but mobile-phone related health issues affected a far greater number of people.

He said there were currently 3 billion mobile phone users worldwide, a number that is growing daily, and people started using them as young as three.

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He said mobile phone radiation could heat the side of the head or potentially thermoelectrically interact with the brain, while Bluetooth devices and "unshielded" headsets could "convert the user's head into an effective, potentially self-harming antenna".

Dr Khurana, who is a staff specialist neurosurgeon at the Canberra Hospital and an associate professor of neurosurgery at the Australian National University, said there had been increased reports of brain tumours associated with heavy and prolonged mobile phone use, particularly on the same side as the person's "preferred ear" for making calls.

Chris Althaus, chief executive of the industry body, the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association, rejected Dr Khurana's conclusions, saying handsets were designed, built and tested to comply with strict science-based guidelines.

Mr Althaus pointed to various research papers including a World Health Organisation fact sheet on the issue, published in 2000, which said no recent reviews had concluded that exposure to the radiofrequency fields from mobile phones and their base stations caused any adverse health consequences.

But the WHO said there were "gaps in knowledge" that required further research to better assess health risks, which would take several years to complete.

Further, Khurana said the WHO fact sheet was irrelevant in this instance because "most of the worrisome data has been surfacing in the last 12-24 months".

A fact sheet on the NSW Cancer Council's website said there was no reason for concern over harmful effects from using mobile phones but relatively little was known on the long-term effects of electromagnetic field exposure, so more research was needed.

Dr Khurana, who since 1994 has received 14 awards, said the time between the commencement of regular mobile phone usage to the diagnosis of a malignant solid brain tumour might be in the order of 10-20 years.

He said the link between mobile phones and brain tumours had not yet been "definitively proven" because widespread mobile phone usage commenced in the mid-1980s and solid tumours might take several years to form.

"In the years 2008-2012, we will have reached the appropriate length of follow-up time to begin to definitively observe the impact of this global technology on brain tumour incidence rates," Dr Khurana said.

But he said there was already enough evidence to warrant industry and governments taking immediate action to reduce mobile phone users' exposure to electromagnetic radiation and inform them of potential dangers.

"Worldwide availability and use of appropriately shielded cell phones and hands-free devices including headsets, increased use of landlines and pagers instead of current mobile and cell phones, and restricted use of cellular and cordless phones among children and adults alike are likely to limit the effects of this physically 'invisible' danger," Dr Khurana said.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/03/31/1206850768836.html>