Australian Mobile Phone Review Prompts Worldwide Attention

April 10, 2008

Vini Khurana hit the big time last week. The Australian neurosurgeon parlayed a 69-page literature review on cell phones and brain tumors into a spot on the U.S. NBC Nightly News. Call it the power of the sound bite.

The centerpiece of Khurana's report is his prediction that cell phone radiation would turn out to be a worse public-health disaster than either smoking or asbestos. On March 27th, the *Canberra Times,* his hometown newspaper, wrote it up under the headline, "Mobiles May Be a Death Sentence." This prompted some chatter among EMF bloggers, but the big break came the following Sunday when the U.K. *Independent* ran its own story: "Mobile Phones 'More Dangerous than Smoking'."

Equating cell phones and tobacco is indeed provocative since we all know that smoking is a killer while the jury is still out on the health risks associated with using a hand-held phone. In fact, this was not the first time a major British newspaper had drawn a parallel between the two. Last year the *Times* asked, "Could [Mobile Phones] Be the Cigarettes of the 21st Century?" The question may have been rhetorical, but the *Times* left nothing to the imagination. "Absolutely," it added.

The *Times* story was definitely noticed, but it was the *Independent* that touched a nerve. Minutes after the Web editors at the *Independent* posted the story, it became one of the lead stories on the "Drudge Report," a favorite among those in search of the latest hot news and gossip. It didn't take long for Khurana's warning to become the #1 most popular story (most read and most e-mailed) on the *Independent*'s Web site. It was still on the list, albeit at #10, a week later. In the meantime, hundreds, if not thousands, of other publications and Web sites repeated the claim that using a cell phone might be worse than smoking.

Few American newspapers went along, but on April 3, Bob Bazell, NBC's chief science correspondent, aired an interview with Michael Thun of the American Cancer Society on the Nightly News. The ACS has long maintained that the link between cell phones and cancer is nothing more than a "myth" (see *MWN,* M/J03, p.3, and August 3, 2007), yet this time Thun allowed that there is some "legitimate uncertainty" over what might happen following long-term, cell-phone use. (At this writing, the segment is still on the NBC News Web site, look under "Health.")

Bazell was skeptical at best. Citing unnamed U.S. "experts," he dismissed Khurana's conclusions as "absurd" and concluded that there is "no evidence of danger." Nevertheless he closed his piece with a precautionary hedge against the unknown. "It's never a bad idea to use your earpiece to get the antenna away from your head," he advised.

Why did Khurana's report get so much more media play than, for example, the *BioInitiative Report,* which offers a much more detailed analysis of EMF health risks by some of the leading researchers in the field? Part of the reason is that Khurana is a brain surgeon and it is only natural for people to think that he would know about brain tumor risks. (Hey, it *is* brain surgery!) That his report offers little that is new may have been missed by those who never ventured beyond the "Key Messages" in its first few pages.

Another way to think about it is that the episode offers another lesson on the vagaries of what becomes news. Few can predict what stories will catch the public's imagination, though a provocative sound bite always helps. Yet, a receptive audience is an important part of the equation. One sure lesson of the Khurana episode is that the public, even though enamored by cell phones, has a latent concern about the long-term risks.

Vini Khurana, Australia, American Cancer Society, Robert Bazell,

© Copyright Microwave News 2003-2026. All Rights Reserved.