Cell Phones and Kids: Where Is ICNIRP?

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The new year brought two fresh initiatives to protect children from cell phone radiation. On January 7, the Finnish Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority (STUK) recommended that parents limit their children's use of mobile phones and, on the same day, the French government announced a series of environmental health proposals which includes a ban on cell phones designed specifically for children younger than six and of advertising that promotes the use of cell phones among those under 12.

STUK has now joined its counterpart radiation protection agencies in a number of other European countries —these include Belgium, France, Russia, Sweden and the U.K.— to encourage precautionary policies for the use of phones by children. Germany's Office of Radiation Protection (BfS) has also advised that all cell phone users exercise prudence. The U.K. Department of Health was the first to advise caution back in 2000 in response to a recommendation from the Stewart expert panel. The following year, the head of Germany's BfS advised that, "Parents should keep their children away from this technology as much as possible" (see *MWN,* J/A01 p.6).

In contrast to all this activity, the lackadaisical approach of the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) is striking. Some 40 countries, many of which have only limited expertise in RF radiation health effects, look to the Commission for advice. Yet, ICNIRP has been silent for ten long years.

Three members of ICNIRP are associated with the same radiation protection agencies that have recommended caution, but all three appear to be sitting on their hands: Rüdiger Matthes, the vice chair of the commission leads the group on Non-Ionizing Radiation Dosimetry at the BfS; HPA's Richard Saunders was the former head of the Non-Ionizing Radiation Effects Group at the U.K.'s Health Protection Agency (HPA) and still works at the HPA part-

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time; and Tony Swerdlow, the chair of HPA's Advisory Group on Non-ionizing Radiation. Clearly neither Saunders nor Swerdlow is following the lead of Sir William Stewart, the chairman of the HPA, who has reiterated the need for precaution many times over the years, as he did at last September's Radiation Research Conference.

ICNIRP's Bernard Veyret of the University of Bordeaux seems similarly out of step with France's health department, which, early last year, recommended that children not use cell phones after its Interphone group pointed to tumor risks among long-term users. More recently, Lyon, the country's second largest city, launched its own advertising campaign with the message: "Just Say No to Cell Phones for Children Under 12." Nevertheless, Veyret remains silent.

In October, Finland's Kari Jokela and Sweden's Maria Feychting, joined the commission. Jokela works at STUK, while Feychting has close ties to the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority. Swedish radiation protection officials advocated precaution five years before STUK —since 2004 when one of Feychting's students, Stefan Lönn, found that long-term cell phone users had higher rates of acoustic neuroma (see also *MWN,* October 12, 2004). They have repeated this advice a number of times since then. Feychting's and Jokela's tenure at ICNIRP has been too short to hold either accountable for the commission's past inaction; time will tell whether they will push for change.

Some say that ICNIRP should be given some slack because it moves very slowly. ICNIRP's last guidelines on RF exposures were published in 1998. How long could it take to write a simple statement urging caution? ICNIRP should follow the lead of its sister group in Moscow: the Russian National Committee on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (RNCNIRP). The Russians issued a warning last spring pointing out that the "potential risk for children's health is very high." They closed with some advice that ICNIRP should take to heart: "It is our professional obligation not to damage the children's health by inactivity."

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