Doubts About Electrosensitivity

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Is it possible that the precautionary principle could do more harm than good? Could the mere suggestion of a health risk bring on effects that it was intended to avoid? Such a phenomenon is known as the *nocebo* effect and has been much discussed in relation to EMFs in general and electrohypersensitivity in particular. For a cogent analysis of all this, check out Stuart Blackman's "Why Health Warnings Can Be Bad," in today's *Financial Times* Weekend magazine.

Blackman quotes James Rubin of Kings College London: "There is no robust evidence that there is a direct link [between reported symptoms and EMFs], and there is reasonably robust evidence that there is no link." Rubin believes that the symptoms are real, but the causes are psychological rather than physiological. Rubin was a speaker at last September's conference, "'EMF & Health – A Global Issue' – Exploring Appropriate Precautionary Approaches." See also his paper: "Electrosensitivity: A Case for Caution with Precaution."

A case in point: Last Sunday, the *Journal de Dimanche,* a leading French newspaper, reported on the Dubas family whose apartment in the Paris suburbs faces three mobile phone antennas installed by Orange, a unit of France Telecom. Thomas Dubas said that he gets a metallic taste in his mouth when the antenna is transmitting; meanwhile his five-year-old daughter developed a bloody nose and a neighbor complained of headaches. A spokesman for Orange responded that while the company was sympathetic with the local residents, it could not be held responsible because the antennas had not yet been activated, according to the Web site Silicon.fr.

Here are Blackman's provocative closing words of caution:

> Legal cases brought against mobile phone companies by people who believe that the electromagnetic radiation given off by their handsets is making them ill might have failed, but cases brought against those who issue health warnings, on the grounds that it exacerbates illness through the

nocebo effect, might prove more successful. At least they would have some scientific evidence to support their claims.

EHS, James Rubin,

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