IARC Tries To Play Down Cell Phone Tumor Risks

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The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is playing some strange games, which will inevitably lead to more public confusion about cell phone cancer risks.

A few days ago, IARC issued some "Questions & Answers" on mobile phones and cancer prompted by last week's release of a new update of the Danish cohort study in the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*. (We'll have much more to say about the Danish study in a later post.)

The Danish study finds no association between phones and brain tumors. IARC includes the following statement in its Q&A: The Danish paper in *BMJ* "confirms the overall Interphone findings of no association." Huh? That doesn't make any sense. Interphone did in fact report an association among long-term users. IARC is well aware of this since Interphone was and continues to be an IARC project. In addition, last May's decision to classify RF radiation as a possible human carcinogen was made by a committee convened by IARC. Indeed in July IARC officially announced that the decision was based in large part on the Interphone study.

We asked Joachim Schüz, who is the head of IARC's section of environment and radiation as well as a member of the Danish study team and the Interphone project, to walk us through this. (It's no secret that Schüz is a leader of the bloc that is deeply skeptical of any tumor risk.) Here's what he told us: "Interphone shows no increased effect estimates by time since first use, which is the most comparable metric to the Danish study." That's true. On the other hand, if you use cumulative call time as the index of use, Interphone shows a 40% increase in the incidence of glioma brain tumors.

As has been widely discussed, Interphone reported risks that are consistently low. When the Interphone team compensated for what

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practically everyone believes is bias in the way the data were collected, it found a doubling of the tumor risk “since first use,” a statistically significant increase. (See: “Interphone’s Provocative Analysis of the Brain Tumor Risks.”)

We asked Schüz about those calculations too. He rejects them. (This may help explain why they were buried in an appendix that was left out of the published paper and banished to the Internet.) Schüz argues that the increase seen in those calculations are “incompatible with no excess seen in the incidence rates.” To support this, he cited a paper he coauthored with Isabelle Deltour and others at the Danish Cancer Society (Schüz worked at the society before joining IARC). But that won’t wash because, as we pointed out long ago, that paper has nothing to say about risks for use of ten years or longer (see the last sentence of the abstract and our post, “Spin, Spin, Spin.”)

IARC is known as the “gold standard” for determining what is a cancer-causing agent. Too bad that IARC’s professional and communications staff is indulging in reverse alchemy, trying to turn gold into base metal.

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