Living Nightmare: How SDG&E Smart Meter Led to Headaches, Hearing Loss

Who would think that a utility company would come on your property and install something dangerous and leave it there?

By Susan Brinchman, Patch Poster Aug 15, 2011 4:25 am ET | Updated Aug 15, 2011 6:09 am ET

One day in the middle of May 2010, SDG&E workers came to my La Mesa home to install a new meter for both my gas and electric service. They did the same for my neighbors. I remember their trucks and the boxes on the sidewalk. How quickly they did it and left. How we turned off our computer and TV to prevent a power surge.

When we least expect it, life sets us a challenge, it is sometimes said.

I really didn't pay much attention to these installations, assuming that they were similar to the old ones, just digital. Boy, was I wrong. As an active, retired educator, I never expected that the challenge would come in the form of harmful radiation coming from these new utility "smart" meters installed by SDG&E. But that is just what has happened.

Please note that everyone in our county and throughout SDG&E's territory had these installed in the past year and a half, except for a handful of people. None of us were told of any risks.

Shortly after, when I began to have ringing ears and sleeplessness, I wondered why but kept thinking it would disappear. I'd hear ringing in my ears no matter what time of day. Even in the night, and it would be more apparent when it was quiet, it seemed.

At night, I'd wake up suddenly around 2:00 or 2:30 AM, the same time every night, wide awake, and have trouble getting back to sleep for several hours. Some nights I didn't sleep much at all, just a couple of hours.

This was also occuring to other members of the household, at times. There were peculiar symptoms that some of us experienced that we could not explain but was making life very complicated.

Last summer was a rough time as a result. There were some headaches. I spent time reading in my room, something I like to do to relax. By fall, things didn't get any better, but worse.

Add to the list, by October, a rapidly growing skin cancer on my face, looked like a largish pencil eraser, you could practically watch it grow ... and it hurt.

The doctors took a bit of time to schedule me in and removed it in January — cut it out, leaving a scar. By the end of November, I noticed in addition to the ringing ears and other symptoms, that I suddenly was extremely nauseous, dizzy, and developing headaches when I used my computer or cell phone.

I'd always kept a good distance from the cell phone for safety sake, used speaker mode, but that wasn't helping.

In frustration, I called a local environmental doctor I'd seen for a workplace mold exposure many years before. I remembered he knew something about electro-sensitivities and thought he might know what was going on. I told him about the computer and cell phone reactions, but nothing else, as I didn't think those things were pertinent. Wrong again.

He asked if I had a smart meter on the house.

I said, "Yes, but what does that have to do with it?" I thought he was changing the subject. He asked if I had any other symptoms and went down a list that included the ringing ears, sleeping problems, and more ... He said that a number of his patients were reporting these same symptoms after installation.

During the few days before I got into see this doctor, I wrote and called SDG&E, with a negative response to my requests to remove the smart meters.

While seeing the doctor, I was shocked to learn more about the new SDG&E meters, that they emitted pulsed RF radiation, something experts warn about, and that many other people in California had the same symptoms after installations of the meters. Further, my electric meter was right near the place where my head lay on the pillow, less than a foot, on the exterior wall. That was very unsettling.

But I felt confident that I could solve this problem as the doctor wrote me a letter that strongly demanded SDG&E remove the meter and replace with an analog as it was causing medical problems for me. In addition, he cited the Americans With Disabilities Act, as I qualified for that category.

He provided me with a handful of current peer-reviewed scientific studies that showed this type of radiation and frequency was associated with the exact set of symptoms I had experienced.

I went home, letter and studies in hand, and filed a complaint with SDG&E and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), attaching my doctor's letter.

My husband and I moved out of the master bedroom, temporarily, to wait for the meter to be removed. I bought shielding for my computer, to be able to use it.

Meanwhile, I made numerous calls to SDG&E. Some left me in tears. It was very troubling to be emphatically told by the SDG&E representatives over the phone that the meters were perfectly safe and were mandated by the state CPUC. I called the state CPUC and they claimed that the federal government was making them mandate these for the state.

Then, they changed their story. The CPUC admitted that it had authorized the use of wireless smart meters, not mandated them. SDG&E never backed down from their stance that everyone was going to have them, there was no "opting" out. I waited for my letters to be arrived and acted on.

Eventually, I received a reply, within a week from SDG&E and about a month or more from the CPUC. Both sent what appeared to be personalized form letters, both denied the possibility of harm from the meters, and both said there was no chance of having the meters removed from my home. I remember bursting into tears when reading these.

It was inconceivable to me that my home, my haven, would be polluted with dangerous radiation that was making me ill and no one in charge of these devices cared at all or would remove them. Ever. My doctor was shocked that they would ignore his letter.

As I researched this problem, for the first time in my life, I knew I was facing what seemed like a challenge without any recourse. And to top things off, the sensitivities to what turned out to be RF radiation, were getting worse by the month. I could not use my computer for several weeks, no more cell phone use, I had to strictly avoid all wireless and RF radiation sources.

My life seemed turned upside down. Headaches, when going near the electric meter, in particular, inside or outside, were progressing into the most severe I'd ever imagined, lasting for up to three days, with chills and dizziness, memory problems ... Sleeping problems continued, the ringing of the ears got more intense till the sound actually hurt and there was loud clicking in my right ear. I later learned this was called "microwave click" from RF radiation exposure.

During several weeks, pain in the right ear was like someone stabbing it. I went to the doctor a lot during this time, to my primary doctor and the environmental doctor, when I could.

Both were supportive and avoidance seemed to be their main suggestions. I stopped going in the master bedroom to obtain clothing and other belongings as needed. I had to ask other family members to get them and move them out into another room.

An ear, nose and throat doctor diagnosed me with significant hearing loss in the painful ear and hearing loss in both ears, noting that it was a result of exposure to electromagnetic fields. He commented that he had some other patients like this, and to avoid the meters. The ringing ears continued.

I was determined to get help, but must tell you how awful it felt to be dismissed so mercilessly by SDG&E and CPUC. It seemed like a living nightmare. I kept calling and writing SDG&E and CPUC, without any help being given. We were still living outside of our master bedroom and bathroom — and in a small house, this was causing problems.

After talking with a number of activists and experts, including scientists, around the state who had more information than me, I scheduled several consultations with electrical engineers with a specialty in RF radiation. They advised that certain metals are what work to shield from the radiation.

A series of experiments resulted, with me trying out their suggestions, to see if anything worked. We shielded, following their directions, behind the meter on the interior wall. This gave relief from the shrill, high-pitched ringing that was painful, it reduced it to a lower level. We still could not occupy the bedroom.

In fact, things were getting worse for me by the month, as I would get an immediate headache and sinuses swelled shut, heart palpitations (typical of RF radiation reactions to overexposures), it seemed like my immune system was saying, "hey, stay away."

I was a slow learner. I remember trying about twelve times in three months to enter the room, running in for just seconds. Didn't work. Headaches for three days. Sick often and had to cancel activities.

I felt increasingly like this was incredible and there HAD to be a way to get this problem solved. Learned about many others, in fact, thousands and thousands of others had filed officially with CPUC on these very health issues related to the smart meters.

By March and April, I watched online as the ill ones went twice a month into the CPUC meetings and explained their symptoms in tears or anger to the very uncaring CPUC commissioners, in the one minute each was given. I cried with them, watching. I kept thinking, this cannot be happening in America. Then the thoughts came: We cannot let this keep happening in America.

Many Northern Californians knew about the problem of the smart meters and radiation — being more environmentally aware and not trusting PG&E, their local utility, after years of other types of problems, such as the poisoning of the town of Hinkley, CA (memorialized in the movie Erin Brokovich).

They had activists protesting smart meters, laying down in front of trucks sent out to install the meters, with news articles by the hundreds. In Northern California, I was encouraged that local governments, inspired by passionate activists, became concerned about protecting the health and safety of their citizens and passed ordinances to ban or even criminalize the installation of smart meters.

The numbers grew - 20 - 30 - 40, including many major counties, such as Marin. There was even a smart meter bill in our state legislature, to effect a moratorium. As I suffered adjusting to the new life without use of my full home, and the changes in my health, I pondered all this.

Southern Californians didn't have anyone who knew anything, no media coverage except for glowing articles about how wonderful our lives would be with the new meters — straight from the utilities' brochures.

No one I knew was informed, and it was hard to explain so they would be. Who would think that a utility company would come on your property and install something dangerous and leave it there?

I learned how the mesh network of these meters emit so much radiation it is like a blanket on our neighborhoods and even the rural areas now have it, and at higher levels, as the signals are stronger to cover the distances. I learned that people with pacemakers and implants were at risk for rf radiation interfering with the functioning of their devices.

I wanted to feel well again. I was in a daily struggle. At the same time, I didn't want the state of California to be polluted with this new form of smog — electrosmog, impacting the public health, our pets, and wildlife.

I learned that a hundred million dollars of our Recovery Act funding had come down the pike quickly, funding much of the wireless meter development in a hasty manner, with environmental, health and safety testing waived by the CPUC. Recovery Act funds had paid for millions of meter readers to lose their jobs and the new meters to be made in China. That growing thousands of Californians were sick and some were worse off than me, even younger ones, with heart attack symptoms and more, die-offs being reported in some areas. Government steadfastly refusing to help in our state and some others where smart meters were also being rolled out.

I began to get headaches from sleeping in the spare room at the end by the smart meter, so had to begin sleeping on the couch. My husband and I, together for nearly 40 years, no longer able to sleep together.

I learned to avoid the smart meter at all times, keeping at least 12-15-20 feet away, and not use 1/3 of my house or yard. I learned how to force myself to accept that for the time being, but not for the rest of my life. I felt improved by doing so, but still had lower level ringing in the ears, enough to wake me up at night, and some sleeplessness, dizziness, low-level headaches.

Other people had to be ill, too, in Southern California. They would never suspect the meters, as I had not.

I was trying to take care of myself while worrying about the bigger picture and public health problem. I learned of more people with very close exposures at night, on bedroom walls. Some of these were children, some I knew.

The So CA media I called were resistant to articles on the topic. I made a website and gathered the scientific information I was directed to by experts, placing it all in one place, www.smartmeterdangers.org. Less than ten people in our county knew something about the smart meter problems.

I was trying to live as normally as possible in the face of this challenge, but was now living in the middle of my home, away from both smart meters (one at each end). Something more had to be done. This could not become the new normal, even if people didn't realize the dangers.

Then, in the midst of this, I found out that Helix Water District planned (very soon) to cover its territory with water smart meters, adding to the radiation. They had a large pilot study on Mt. Helix, 322 smart meters had been there for the past year. Of course, no one had been told of the risks.

My regular water meter was in the front of the house. When walking my dog, I'd be walking past all of the new smart meters they were planning to install. The water district assured me that it didn't matter as the radiation was low and wouldn't reach the house. I should stay inside all the time?

I'd heard of people abandoning their homes and going to live in their cars or tents in Northern California media stories, due to the radiation reactions. I didn't want to have this happen to me, here. The water meter would then potentially cause the middle of my home, the place I was occupying like a studio, to be unlivable.

This had to be stopped.

I nearly panicked but then realized I hadn't known in time to stop the deployment of the SDG&E meters, but I wasn't going to stand by while Helix Water District finished me off. I had to take a stand, and quickly.

Throughout all of this time, from early December through April, I kept thinking that this cannot happen in America. But it was. Something definitely had to be done, more, but what? I was struggling to stay well and struggling to figure out that answer.

SDG&E's answer to me:

Susan Brinchman
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
La Mesa, CA 91942
Re: Account #xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

December 13,2010

Dear Ms. Brinchman:

I want to follow up on the December 7, 2010 telephone call to you by my colleague Shannon Ray to discuss your request for San Diego Gas & Electric Company (SDG&E) to remove the electric smart meter installed at your home on May 6, 2010. Thank you for sharing your questions and concerns about SDG&E's smart meters. We understand from your telephone communications, and from the doctor's letter you faxed, that you are concerned that the radio frequency (RF) electromagnetic fields emitted from the smart meter wireless communication equipment could possibly contribute to your pre-existing health conditions. It is also our understanding that you declined SDG&E's offer to take measurements of RF from the smart meter at your home. [Note: this is inaccurate, as I now do not trust SDGE, I did not want them INSIDE my home, they could measure from outside. sb]

SDG&E is committed to providing safe and reliable service for our customers, as well as a safe work place for our employees. To this end, we monitor the science concerning possible effects of RF from smart meters. The information that SDG&E has reviewed from the scientific community and regulators has not identified that radio frequencies, at the levels emitted by the smart meters, can cause adverse health effects. Specifically, we understand from respected agencies such as the World Health Organization, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, that there has been no demonstration of either long- or short-term health effects from RF exposure. Vole will continue to monitor the situation closely and respond as necessary to any new scientific information and studies released in the future.

As explained on SDG&E's Smart Meter website (http://www.sdge.com/smartmeter/faq.shtml) the meters near your home transmit a radio frequency only a few times each day and only for a few seconds each time, for an average total of less than one minute. When the meters are transmitting, your exposure to RF from the smart meter is much lower than the exposure from energy than smart meters!

I also wanted to mention that the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has directed SDG&E to install smart meters at the homes and businesses of all of our customers and has carefully considered any potential for smart meters to affect health. SDG&E is a regulated company and required to comply with the CPUC program. Also, the Americans with Disabilities Act mentioned by your doctor, does not require SDG&E to remove your smart meter. We received your letter to the CPUC Consumer Affairs Branch, dated December 8, 2010, and we agree that such a submission is the next appropriate step in resolution of your request for removal of the meter at your home. In this regard, SDG&E has carefully reviewed available factual information, and at this time respectfully declines your request to remove the smart meter at your home.

Sincerely,

Ted Reguly
Director
SDG&E's Smart Meter Program

[Enclosed]
Source: Richard Tell Associates. Inc

RF Energy Compared to a Smart Meter from 2 feet:

Microwave oven, two inches from door, 550 times more

Holding walkie-talkie at head, 55 – 4,600 times more

Cell phone at head, 3.2 -1.100 times more

Laptop computer, 1.1 – 2.2 times more

Wi-Fi cyber cafe, 1.1 – 2.2 times more

[Note: The Smart Meter is inches from my head, not two feet. Also, I do not accept the above table, as no authoritative references are given, and it is too general. Nowhere are the technology effects for Smart Meters deemed safe. sb]