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**CENTER OF GRAVITY**

By Rony V. Diaz

**Cellphones and brain cancer**

IS there a link between heavy cellphone use and tumors in the neck and brain?

A 10-year study by Interphone of 7,400 cancer patients would have partly answered the question. But the final report that should have been published in 2006 was delayed because of disagreements among the researchers.

Michael Milligan, the secretary-general of the Mobile Manufacturers Forum, said that the industry was disappointed. (Doreen Carvajal, The New York Times, June 30).

Interphone brought together scientists from more than a dozen countries to investigate the health risks of cellphones. It was taxpayer-supported as well as by mobile phone makers, including Nokia, through their organization, The GSM Association. The total cost of the study was US\$24 million.

Interphone's director, Elisabeth Cardis, was vague on when the report might be released. She did admit that the delay was "caused" by additional research on how cancer patients, compared to those in a control group, remembered details of past phone use—frequency, length of use, position of the phone when in use and so on. This was necessary because both cancer patients and those in the control group "tended to underestimate the number of their calls while overestimating the duration of calls" (Carvajal, NYT, June 30).

At the annual meeting in June of the Bioelectromagnetics Society in San Diego, California, Louis Slesin, the editor of a trade journal called Microwave News, reported that the panel discussion on brain tumors showed clearly a split among the Interphone researchers. For example, the Israelis and the Australians were for urging people to moderate cellphone use while the English and the Germans were reluctant neither to draw conclusions nor to suggest specific actions because of "recall bias."

Joachim Schüz, the cancer specialist who headed the German team of Interphone, was dismissive of the disagreements. The evidence, he told the New York Times, was convincing that there was no risk from short-term cellphone use although there were "uncertainties" about long-term use.

Long-term was defined as more than 10 years on the same side of the head. Some countries, despite small national samples, have begun recommending moderate cellphone use that they might revise once the final report had been issued.



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However, institutions like the World Health Organization, are not likely to draw any conclusion, even for moderate use, until publications of the Interphone report.

The European Commission coursed its financial contribution to Interphone through the International Union Against Cancer in order to isolate the scientists from any possible influence by mobile phone manufacturers.

The industry, however, scrupulously maintained its distance from the debates among the scientists although there are still skeptics who believe that they will not be all that detached.

At the San Diego meeting, two versions of the Interphone report were circulated. There were no details in the New York Times story on the differences between the two versions but it did quote Cindy Sage who was involved in a review of existing studies on the health risks of cellphone use. She said: "This enormous project may come to nothing but ambiguous results. It sounds pessimistic at this point. What I worry about is that the study will be publicized as an 'all clear' when in fact the study failed to do a good enough job to know."

Perhaps a more balanced point of view is Elisabeth Cardis's who has since left Interphone for a position at the Center for Research in Environmental Epidemiology in Barcelona, Spain. She told Le Monde: "I would concur with the idea of limiting the use among young people, first of all because throughout their life they are going to be using a phone a lot more than all of us but I would certainly not ban phones because they are too useful."

Filipinos are already among the heaviest users of cellphones but more for sending text messages rather than for voice communication.

But as the cost of voice declines due to competition, government regulation, technology improvement and economies of scale, talk could equal or even exceed text in both frequency and duration of use. If there's a proven link between cancer and electromagnetic radiation, then the government and the cellphone companies have an obligation to give timely and accurate advice on cellphone use.▲

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