Link between magnetic fields and leukaemia is weak

David Spurgeon, *Quebec*

A Canadian study has shown higher rates of leukaemia among children who were exposed at an early age to electromagnetic fields in their homes than among those less exposed. But it does not show that these fields cause cancer, and a separate, US study concludes independently that the evidence for a causal relation is weak.

The Canadian study, carried out by researchers at the University of Toronto and the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, with partial funding from the Ontario Hydro Services Company and the Canadian Electrical Association, was reported in two separate papers in the *International Journal of Cancer* (1999;82:161-70) and the journal *Cancer Causes and Control* (1999;10:233-43). The US study was a review and analysis of six years of existing data in a report to Congress by the National Institute of Envi-

ronmental Health Sciences.

Researchers compared 201 children living in the greater Toronto area and diagnosed with leukaemia at up to age 14 years between 1985 and 1993, with 406 controls. By measuring exposures to electric and magnetic fields inside and outside their homes they found that those with higher exposures were two to four times more likely to develop leukaemia than those less exposed. Risks were higher for children diagnosed at less than 6 years of age and for those with lymphoblastic leukaemia.

The lead author, Lois Green, epidemiologist in the university's public health sciences department and at Ontario Power Generation, says that the association between magnetic fields and risk of leukaemia became stronger as methods of measuring exposure were

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Causal link between magnetic fields and cancer is confirmed as weak

refined, particularly in younger children. But this study does not establish that magnetic fields cause cancer," she said. "To date, laboratory research has not shown a plausible biological mechanism supporting a cause and effect relationship."

The US report says that "the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences believes that the probability that electromagnetic field exposure is truly a health hazard is currently small." The study also found

inadequate evidence of any link to other diseases, such as Alzheimer's, depression, and birth defects. It, too, cited an absence of laboratory evidence for a cause and effect relation.

It said, however, that the epidemiological associations cannot be completely discounted, and for that reason and because virtually everyone in the United States is routinely exposed to electric and magnetic fields, "efforts to encourage reductions in exposure should continue." □

NHS librarians cannot access the internet

Douglas Carnall, *BMJ*

Managerial paranoia and obstruction are some of the main reasons preventing hospital libraries from obtaining information from the internet, according to an informal survey conducted by OMNI (the Organisation for Medical Networked Information), a medical internet access service, based at Nottingham University.

The service's research began because of the large number of written and telephone contacts that it was receiving, when email would have been quicker and more convenient.

The survey's author, John Kirriemuir, an information scientist and the service manager of OMNI, circulated questionnaires electronically and in the post to information professionals and librarians who had used the post, telephone, or fax to contact OMNI, rather than

email. NHS trust librarians are important because it is they to whom health professionals are likely to turn when they require information from the internet.

"In fact, we find that many health professionals have just bypassed the NHS altogether, and if they want to use the internet they do so at home," he explained. "This may not be a problem for doctors, who are an affluent group, but many library staff rely on having a suitable machine at work. One respondent told us that if a member of staff came seeking information that was available on the internet he or she would be directed to a cybercafe a few streets away." The effect, he claims, is deskilling and demoralising for medical librarians.

"Some of the difficulties people are operating under are bizarre. One of the commonest is a restriction that bans users from initiating new email messages, though they are allowed to reply to email received."

Some trusts in this group seem to have exaggerated fears of the security risks of giving internet access to employees, fearing disruptive internal hack-

ing, though one respondent rather bitterly retorted, "I can't even get the trust to pay for me to go on a wordprocessing course, yet they reckon we are all superhackers."

Another common pattern is that senior trust managers reserve internet access for themselves but deny it to their staff, using sometimes dubious arguments. One respondent claimed that a manager had "told us quite seriously that the internet is proved to deprave and corrupt and that we will be drawn into looking at pornography all day."

According to Mr Kirriemuir, the government must take a lead in guaranteeing internet access for all information services in NHS organisations, though he also advocates "bottom up attack," in which librarians in neighbouring trusts with decent access share policies and information with their less fortunate neighbours, and more formal quantitative research on the problem is planned.

The full findings of the report can be found at www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue20/omni/. The OMNI website is at www.omni.ac.uk. □

Some operating theatres used only half time

Bryan Christie, *Edinburgh*

Wide variations have been found in the use of operating theatre time in Scottish hospitals, with some surgical specialties using fewer than half the sessions available to them.

A report from the Accounts Commission for Scotland makes a series of recommendations on how the situation can be improved while recognising that, on average, operating theatres in Scottish hospitals are being generally well managed.

An inquiry conducted in 27 hospitals found that, overall, 88% of available theatre time was being used compared with a target of 90%.

A similar analysis carried out in England in the late 1980s found that theatres were in use for only around 70% of the scheduled time, which led to the adoption of the 90% target. □