

Controversy at IARC

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A few years ago, there was a flap over something called DEHP. It's found in IV bags, blood bags and tubing of all kinds. DEHP makes plastic soft, pliable and strong. It was found to cause problems in rats, including infertility.

After a full review, IARC decided to downgrade the risk of cancer from DEHP. That opened the door for more widespread use.

For Lorenzo Tomatis, the downgrading of DEHP was a clear sign IARC had let industry get too close to the science. He and 30 other scientists from around the world decided to go public with their fears saying that allowing industry representatives to take part in IARC's decisions about what is cancerous "compromises public health" and that scientific papers showing a possible link to cancer had been "ignored or intentionally suppressed."

"If you delete a suspicion of a risk," Tomatis said, "you give full green light and that may create a special danger for the public."



Lorenzo Tomatis

Paul Kleihues took over from Tomatis as head of IARC. He says these critics always see industry as the enemy of public health.

"If they don't have scientific reasons they suggest a conflict of interest of industry or participants that have a vested interest. We do not believe that any of our recent decisions was ultimately influenced by industry."

Kleihues rejected the accusation and then barred Lorenzo Tomatis from ever re-entering the building.

"He told me I was persona non grata and had me escorted out by two witnesses from the building saying I was not allowed to come back...I think even Saddam Hussein could go back into IARC but not me. I found it totally absurd because it was a disagreement on the interpretation of scientific data."

"We did not ban him because of a scientific disagreement," Peter Kleihues said. "What is not acceptable is that he questions our integrity, our striving for scientific truth. If scientific truth is no longer our guiding principle, we'd better close this whole place down."



Peter Kleiheus

What does this squabbling mean for the cellphone study and for those of us who use a cellphone? The critics are accusing IARC of not trying hard enough to keep industry money and influence away from the science. *Marketplace* wondered whether industry money could be influencing IARC's study on cellphones, especially in Canada.

Calling Canada

Dan Krewski, of the McLaughlin Centre for Population Health Risk Assessment at the University of Ottawa, is one of Canada's lead scientists for the IARC study.

"This'll be the largest study of brain cancer ever conducted and will give us the opportunity to really look in detail for small risks with cellular technology."

Krewski has about a million dollars to fund his part of the IARC research.

Most of it came from the Canadian Wireless and Telecommunications Association — the cellphone industry lobby group.

"We originally approached the CWTA through Roger Poirier who at the time was president and CEO of the organization."

Poirier's the man who said studies into the cellphones and cancer risks showed "...no adverse health effects..."



Dan Krewski

The current head of the association is Peter Barnes. He says the million dollars his lobby group is giving to Krewski's centre has no strings attached.

"I mean we basically sign a cheque every year for five years, we committed to that, and apart from knowing that the money is being used for the research that's the extent of our involvement."

IARC told *Marketplace* that Canada is the only one of 13 countries in the study to receive funding directly from the cellphone industry.

Marketplace's research found that the CWTA and its members invested \$1 million to help establish the R. Samuel McLaughlin Centre for Population Health Risk Assessment at the University of Ottawa — where Dan Krewski is doing his cellphone research.

Krewski's centre gets the cheques directly from the CWTA. But to get the relationship stamped officially "arm's length," he had to get the deal reviewed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, which also threw in \$220,000 of government money.

According to IARC guidelines, this funding has to be indirect - so it went through the CIHR. That makes the funding not directly connected to the industry.

The study is not Krewski's only link to the cellphone industry. If you search the web for information about cellphones, you might come across the Wireless Information Resource Centre — paid for by the CWTA.

Krewski chairs the Wireless Information Resource Centre's scientific advisory group. Roger Poirier — former head of the CWTA — administers the web site. Another link between the cellphone scientist and the cellphone lobby: Poirier — the man who negotiated the million-dollar deal — is a paid consultant on the big cellphone study for IARC.

When we reached Poirier by phone, he told us his involvement with the cellphone study is minor and purely technical. He didn't want to talk to us on camera.

Krewski described Poirier's involvement as "a liaison."

"He puts us in contact with the right people when we need info on technical aspects of cell phones for the WHO study...He doesn't see scientific results, he does not participate in scientific meetings."

A chart we produce for Krewski shows the same names and links popping up frequently.

"I can see how you could get that sort of perception there may be something leading to some sort of complications here, but if you actually look at the roles of the organizations and agencies that you've got on your chart and what they're actually doing, the industry, clearly, both in Canada and internationally, is hands off," Krewski says.

But it wasn't that clear in Europe. The scientists at IARC say the European cellphone industry did try to negotiate more influence over that end of the study.

"So we wanted not only to avoid any bias, but we didn't want to get any involvement with an industry which then doesn't like the results and tries all kinds of things," IARC's Peter Kleihues said.

Kleihues told us industry reps came knocking as the negotiations on the study were happening.

"They wanted to give us the money. They said 'enlarge, do more, you will be happy because we are so much interested, we are under pressure, we would like a bigger and better study,' and we said 'no, it's not possible, we can't accept the money.'"

"Yeah, basically we refused until a contract was drawn up that ensured we had no strings attached," research scientist Elisabeth Cardis said.

That means there is still industry funding in Europe, but a third party administers the money. In Canada, the industry money goes to Dan Krewski's centre.

"We are trying very hard through various mechanisms to make sure that everything is going well in the countries to review...to see what mechanisms have been set up. We have been preparing declarations of interest for example; we've been documenting sources. We're getting copies of all the contracts. If we feel that any centre has a potential conflict of interest, that centre's not going to be included in the international analysis," Cardis said.

Cardis adds the connections involved with the Canadian part of the study don't seem to be a conflict of interest to her. But her boss — IARC chief Paul Kleihues — does seem concerned about our findings.

"Well, I think this is a reason for concern. Industry doesn't give you a free lunch usually. That means industry expects something back for any money they do, and I think we must look into this. It's a matter of concern and we must find out if it's sufficient reason to exclude that branch of the study or not."

Kleihues goes on to say that as far as he can see, the Canadian part of the study appears to have been set up carefully, to follow the rules.

As we kept digging, we discovered that not only does the Canadian cellphone lobby pay for a chunk of Krewski's research at the University of Ottawa, it also has an impact on his salary. We learned that the CWTA money unleashes government money that goes towards Krewski's salary. Krewski says these arrangements are all above board.

The head of IARC - Paul Kleihues told us he was reviewing for possible conflicts of interest the contracts people like Krewski had signed. He said no decisions or changes would be made until an IARC meeting in mid-December.

As for the study itself — it won't be complete for a couple of years. So get ready for another long wait before we get any definitive answer on that old riddle over cellphones and cancer.

All cellphones in Canada meet the basic radiation safety guidelines. But anyone concerned about exposure can take a couple of steps to limit it:

- When you see only one or two bars on your phone's display, it means the signal is weak and your phone is trying harder to connect with the tower. That's when radiation is highest. Wait until all the bars are there for less radiation.
- Radiation is also higher when you first place a call, as your phone seeks a connection. If you wait until the call has connected, your exposure will be lower.
- Keep your calls short — shorter calls means less exposure.