

Teachers' Wi-Fi warning causes waves

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Wireless sensitivity is like a peanut allergy you can't see.

For the people who have it, it's hell. But for everybody else, you're just ruining a really good sandwich.

And, until 45,000 teachers brought it back to the forefront Monday, most had dismissed the effects of invisible airwaves outright.

However, the recent outcry by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) to shelve the usage of Wi-Fi in schools pending more research into wireless technology is causing headaches for many administrators.

Much like the headaches, dizziness, nausea, vertigo, racing heart, memory loss and skin rash that parents of children who attend school with Wi-Fi available are claiming their children suffer.

"My son got a nose bleed on the days he was in school," said Colleen Genno, mother of now five-year-old Matthew. "He only went to school two days a week in junior Kindergarten and he got the nosebleeds on the days he went to school."

Genno says when her son began school at Monsignor Lee Catholic Elementary School in Orillia, she noticed the days he attended became the days he got sick.

Genno said she her niece had suffered with fevers and a host of other ailments that winter, and it wasn't until they discovered the school had installed Wi-Fi in January, they found the cause of their discontent.

"I'm sensitive to it, too. I can't even have a microwave in the house," said Genno, who said she feels a pressure in her head and a ringing in her ears around electromagnetic waves.

The school refused to remove the Wi-Fi, so she removed her son and niece, and now shares duties home-schooling them with her mother, a retired teacher.

The Catholic teachers' call for a moratorium on wireless Internet follows a warning from the World Health Organization in May. The WHO's cancer centre called for more research into the potential dangers of Wi-Fi, noting all radiation from wireless devices could be carcinogenic.

Last December, Health Canada published an updated statement on its website concerned about the potential risks of wireless technology.

"In 2011, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified RF (Radio Frequency) energy as possibly carcinogenic to humans'," the department's website states.

"The IARC classification of RF energy reflects the fact that some limited evidence exists that RF energy might be a risk factor for cancer. However, the vast majority of scientific research to-date does not support a link between RF energy exposure and human cancers. At present, the evidence of a possible link between RF energy exposure and cancer risk is far from conclusive and more research is needed to clarify this possible link."

Health Canada's website says the department agrees with the WHO that 'more research in this area is warranted.'

In Simcoe County, both the school boards and health unit are convinced the technology is safe and in fact, a godsend at the schools.

"We're not scientific experts on this, so we have to take direction from the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit on this," said Pauline Stevenson, spokeswoman for the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board.

"It doesn't seem to be a prevalent issue in our school community, I'd say it was the opposite. Parents want their children to have access to the best technologies available."

Stevenson said Wi-Fi is in all of their schools; both elementary and secondary. They use a Wi-Fi cart system whereby they deliver a stack of laptops to a classroom via a trolley and the Wi-Fi modem is affixed to the cart.

"It's not 100% completely Wi-Fi. I'd say there are pockets of Wi-Fi in all our schools."

People have expressed concerns about the wireless technology at the public schools, said John Dance, superintendent of facility services at the Simcoe County District School Board.

He said they'd done testing at the schools, and at one school, one out of 33 laptops tested showed raised levels close to the screen.

"Ten centimetres back, where your hands would be, there was nothing," said Dance. In a detailed report on the public school board's website, they list the August 2010 Health Canada statement, as well as the Chief Medical Officer Dr. Arlene King's statement, both assuring the public there is no cause for concern.

And, it may be too late to put the genie back in the bottle. Every elementary and secondary school in the public board goes wireless now.

Dance said he now recommends that people who have concerns call the health unit directly if they have a health concern.

President of OECTA, Kevin O'Dwyer, said a report by the union's health and safety committee determined there wasn't enough research on the subject and what is available wasn't "clear and definitive".

"We're trying to be objective," said O'Dwyer, adding several teachers have raised concern about reactions to wireless technology. "They believe there's enough cause to look into the highest rate of potential exposure, and that there's a need to do more study and more research."

But Dr. Jennifer Armstrong who runs an environmental clinic in Ottawa looks after patients with a host of chemical and environmental allergies and sensitivities.

"I believe people who are chemical-sensitive, might have an electromagnetic sensitivity as well," said Armstrong.

"My fears (with Wi-Fi) are, children are still growing, their skulls and bones are thinner. They receive more radiation than we do with all of these devices. We just don't know enough about it. But do we wait until they all grow up and get cancer to find out?"

cbrowne@thebarrieexaminer.com

twitter.com/CherylBrowne1

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