

New City policy examines cellphone safety

VENNESSA SCHOLTZ

Your cellphone may give you cancer according to the World Health Organisation, however, the jury is still out on whether cellphone masts pose the same threat.

The City is proposing "precautionary measures" to offset potential health dangers from cellphone masts.

But Professor Rodney Ehrlich of the Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health Research at the University of Cape Town says "there is not enough evidence" to suggest the masts are a danger.

"Recently there have been international studies which indicate that your cancer risk is higher with the intense use of cellphones. However, the same cannot be said for the masts. The research on that still continues," he said.

The City's proposal of new measures is the first revision of its Cellular Telecommunication Infrastructure policy since its introduction in 2002. The draft policy aims at minimising health risks by taking a "precautionary approach", with a focus on the risks of exposure to electromagnetic energy (EME).

One of the big changes in the policy is that instead of only focusing on the cellular industry, the draft policy covers all telecommunication infrastructure.

"The approach taken is to protect the visual character and amenity of the City of Cape Town

as far as possible, and to minimise the health risks (known/potential and perceived) associated with EME," the policy reads.

Councillor Lungiswa James, mayoral committee member for health, said research into potential health hazards of telecommunication infrastructure was ongoing.

"The City is proposing added measures such as instructing all applicants to supply additional information on radiation levels should any telecommunication infrastructure be placed within 50 metres of habitable structures.

"In 2002, the City approved a policy but the rapid development of technology has obliged us to look at a much wider field than just cellular communication. The draft policy aims to facilitate the expansion of new and existing telecommunication systems in the city without negatively affecting the health of the community," she said.

The City bases its guidelines on those of the national Department of Health according to the document.

A department circular says there is no conclusive evidence that base station emissions threaten public health. Some of the guidelines include that antennae on top of the sites must be more than 50m away from any "habitable structures", all sites must also be in commercial and business areas, cabling should be placed underground, and no unauthorised people should be allowed access to the top of the

structure, and they cannot come within 5 metres of the antenna.

It is proposed that structures supporting the masts are placed where trees or other landscaping can provide camouflage.

Companies will have to pay for test reports once the site is operational, which will be submitted to the council.

Last month the City agreed to continue the leases on City-owned land for the cell and radio masts of the country's major telecommunication companies including Cell C, MTN, Vodacom and Sentech.

Meanwhile the WHO, and its subsidiary investigative panel the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), has released a statement saying radiation from cellphones can possibly cause cancer and now lists mobile phone use in the same carcinogenic (cancer causing) hazard category as lead, engine exhaust and chloroform.

A team of 31 scientists from 14 countries made the decision after reviewing peer-reviewed studies on cellphone safety. The team found enough evidence to categorise personal exposure as "possibly carcinogenic to humans".

According to the WHO website the type of radiation from a cellphone is called non-ionising.

"Mobile phones are low-powered radiofrequency transmitters, operating at frequencies between 450 and 2 700 MHz with peak powers in the range of 0.1 to two watts. The handset only transmits power

when it is turned on. The power, and the radiofrequency exposure to a user, falls off rapidly with increasing distance from the handset.

"A person using a mobile phone 30-40 cm away from their body – for example when text messaging, accessing the internet, or using a hands-free device – will therefore have a much lower exposure to radiofrequency fields than someone holding the handset against their head."

According to the WHO using the phone in areas of good reception also decreases exposure as it allows the phone to transmit at reduced power.

The organisation refers to the fact that cellphones are often banned from being used in hospitals and on airplanes because "the radiofrequency signals may interfere with certain electro-medical devices and navigation systems".

Richard Boorman, Vodacom's executive head of media relations, said cellphones adjusted their power output according to the signal strength from the base station.

"In other words, by ensuring a good base station signal the exposure from cellphones can be reduced."

He said the highest exposure to electromagnetic frequency (EMF) came from cellphones and not base stations. EMF was emitted by many other sources including radio and TV transmitters, kettles, vacuum cleaners, microwave ovens, and

electric blankets. "Sunlight itself is also a form of EMF. With this in mind, it doesn't make sense to single out telecommunication infrastructure, such as base stations, which are extremely low powered devices. The typical output of each base station in each direction is between 100 and 150 watts, which is equivalent to a couple of old-style incandescent light bulbs. The maximum exposure to EMF people typically receive from base stations is a small fraction of the internationally recognised safety guidelines," explains Mr Boorman.

Mothibi Ramusi, Cell C's executive head of Regulatory Affairs, said they "are aware of the draft policy and are preparing a response" but couldn't comment yet.

For more information about the WHO release go to www.iarc.fr.

The draft policy is available for public comment. Copies of the policy can be viewed at all sub-council offices and public libraries.

It can also be downloaded from www.capetown.gov.za and residents can also request a copy by email to ti.policy@capetown.gov.za

Direct enquiries by email to ti.policy@capetown.gov.za or call Ronelle Clarke on 021 400 6534.

Comments on the draft policy must be submitted on or before Wednesday August 31 by faxing it to 021 425 4448, email to ti.policy@capetown.gov.za or post it to The Manager, Environmental and Heritage Management Branch, PO Box 4529, Cape Town, 8000.