



Call to stop cellmast

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Cellphone network operator, Cell C, has denied that pupils at Rondebosch East Primary and residents living nearby are at risk of developing skin rashes, headaches and ringing in the ears from radio signals which will be emitted by a cellmast which is nearing completion at the school.

This after a Rondebosch mother of two, Mehnaaz Essop, decided to draw up a petition, which has attracted 30 signatures, calling for the removal of the mast.

Although none of her children attends the school, Ms Essop says she was horrified to see the pole, which was put up just weeks after she had seen a programme by Carte Blanche on M-Net and read a Sunday newspaper report about a group of Grade 8 Johannesburg school pupils who compiled data on the "harmful health effects of radiation from a Vodacom mast" for a science project.

The project was reportedly supervised by a Gauteng-based

engineer and the founder of the Electromagnetic Radiation Research Foundation of South Africa (ERRFSA), Tracey-Lee Dorny, who said that people had been "kept in the dark for far too long" about the dangers of electromagnetic fields. Ms Dorny says the foundation was established after she, along with her neighbours, started suffering from headaches and other symptoms after a mast was erected in Fourways, the suburb where she lives in Sandton, Johannesburg.

Armed with this information, Ms Essop told the Tatler on Wednesday July 6, that she asked the principal, Matthew Lambert, whether he had done any research before giving the go-ahead. He reportedly told her that he had browsed the internet and found that studies about whether radio frequency signal can be harmful were "inconclusive".

"I spoke to Mr Lambert and asked him if he had asked for expert advice but he said that he had not. If you are responsible for children you need to operate from a sound knowledge base. Are you

willing to take the gamble and risk the lives of children? It does not mean that if results were inconclusive that there are no effects. There are many articles which now state the opposite," she explained.

Mr Lambert told the Tatler he was aware of the concerns raised by some of the parents but could not comment any further on the issue.

"I have been made aware of the response to the cellmast to the district office and they in turn will forward this response to the office of the MEC," he said.

Ms Essop also told the Tatler that Cell C had approached Idamia College in Lansdowne Road three years earlier but they had been "wise enough" and rejected the offer.

Bronagh Casey, spokesperson for Education MEC, Donald Grant, said there was no official policy on the installation of cellphone masts in public schools.

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Parenting Teens Course

16 August – 13 September



The course is for any parent with children aged between 12 and 18 years and for those who wish to prepare for the teenage years. The course, while based on Christian principles, is relevant and helpful for any parent with or

■ The cell mast being built at Rondebosch East Primary School has residents up in arms.

Photo: Karen Kotze

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The National Department of Health was best placed to deal with the issue, she said. It was, however, up to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to decide what happens inside their schools.

"However, School Governing Bodies should take into account and respect the feelings and views of their school community before making a decision on lease arrangements even when these financially benefit the school. They should first consult widely before making such a decision," said Ms Casey.

Ms Essop said so far 30 residents and parents have signed her petition. While most are "outraged", some parents told her the school had nothing to worry about, she said.

One mother told her there were no risks. "Apparently some of the staff members at the school are also unhappy but they feel powerless. What the council must do is to prevent cell phone masts from being put up in all schools," Ms Essop said.

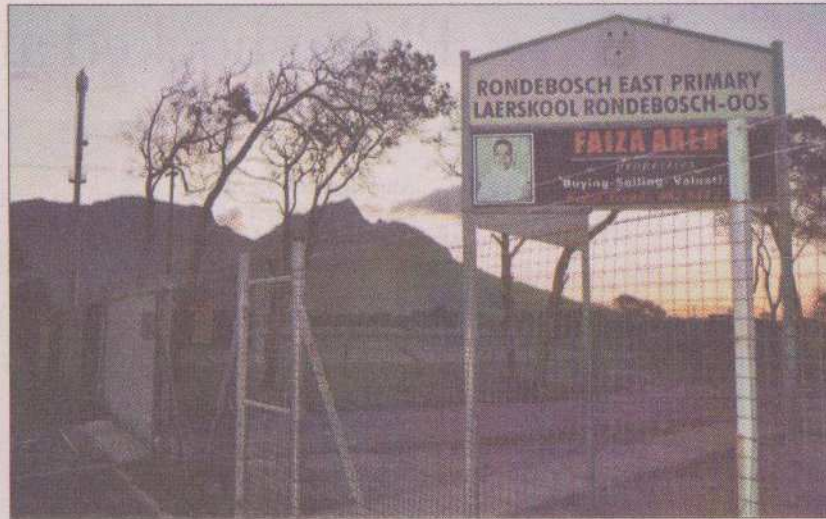
One of the residents, Mohammed Sayed, who is an asthmatic living near the mast, said the school ignored the residents' plight and went ahead and put the mast up.

"I wrote a letter to the principal telling him that I am not happy with the mast. He told me they had given their approval and could not reverse the decision. The school did not consult with the parents besides letters from Cell C or the City informing us of their decision to build the mast. I objected to this by replying to the letter but they still went ahead," he said.

The City's health director, Dr Ivan Bromfield, said the health department has no objection to the installation of mast infrastructure as long as precautions and the guidelines of the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) are followed.

He said the City's policy, which will be used to assess applications to build infrastruc-

■ Experts say the cellmast will have negative health effects on the pupils at Rondebosch East Primary School.



ture by cellphone operators in public, was under review and would be published for public comment in "due course".

"It must be borne in mind that electromagnetic energy is all around us. It comes from radio and television networks, cordless phones, wireless, modem routers in our homes and offices. Even a hairdryer emits some electromagnetic energy," Dr Bromfield explained.

The ICNIRP is an independent scientific organisation whose aims are to provide guidance and advice on the health hazards of non-ionizing radiation exposure. Recent studies by the World Health Organisation (WHO) have suggested that exposure to radiation may have "carcinogenic" effects on humans, said Dr Bromfield.

Meanwhile, Ms Dorny claimed that children who were exposed to radio frequencies for any length of time were at risk of developin leukaemia, epilepsy and diabetes, among others. There is currently no one monitoring the industry and no legislation in place to protect the public by government departments. Ms Dorny said it was "ap-

palling" that service providers and schools put their business interests ahead of the health of the next generations.

"The Department of Education is also at fault as they should have examined what has been done internationally and applied precautionary principles. For instance, Taiwan removed 1 500 masts in and near all their schools in 2007. Some schools have said they were told by the service providers or their engineers it was safe. That is akin to believing the Camel Man saying that smoking is safe or does not cause lung cancer," said Ms Dorny.

The City's director for planning and building development management, Cheryl Walters, confirmed that an application was received by the Athlone sub-Council in 2008 and approved two years later. Only two objections had been received, but these won the right of appeal. The appeal date ended on Thursday July 21.

Executive Head: Network Implementation, Network Transformation at Cell C, Wiaan Vermaak, said the mast was still being built. He added that an environmental assess-

ment impact (EIA) had been done in 2009 and a deal was entered into with the landlord this year. However, he would not say how much they were paying the school as it was "confidential".

"Cell C is fully compliant with international safety requirements and best practice. All requirements for these approvals have been complied with as part of the acquisition process for this site. In the event that it is proven in a reputable court of law that the emissions on this site are harmful to the public, the site will be removed with immediate effect as per such court order," he said.

Cell C public relations manager, Karin Fourie, confirmed that, "A commercial agreement (was) entered into with the landowner and a lease agreement signed. The rentals are market related and are negotiated between the two parties. The leases are individually negotiated and depend on the area and due to the confidential nature of the agreement we are unable to divulge details of the contract.

"This process involves the participation of the public as well as ratepayers to afford them a platform to raise their concerns, which they do more often than not.

"While research is ongoing, there is no conclusive evidence to prove that masts or base stations pose certain health hazards. Cell C plans its site locations based on the demand for mobile communications from the general public and the level of existing coverage signal in the specific area. Great consideration is given to the environmental impact and permits required by the local authorities. All required processes are followed and adhered to in this regard," she said.

Ward 60 DA Councillor, Anthea Green said she had received complaints from "quite a few residents" about the mast but referred the matter to the Department of Education as she was new to the council. The National Department of Health was not available for comment.