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New cellphone health alert

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SOUTH Africa's health and environment ministers have been urged to review local safety regulations for cellphone technology following a recent World Health Organisation study which found that wireless phones could be linked to a greater risk of brain cancer.

However, Environment Minister Edna Molewa said she had no immediate plans to consider "buffer zones" or other new action to regulate cellphone masts or base stations.



Molewa was responding to written questions in Parliament from Gareth Morgan, the DA spokesman on environmental affairs.

Morgan had asked whether her department had reviewed the study on the health risks of cellphones and radio frequency electromagnetic fields. The report was published on March 31 by the organisation's specialist agency on cancer, the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

Based on a review of recent research, the agency classified cellphone usage as "possibly carcinogenic to humans".

An agency working group made up of 31 scientists from 14 countries did not quantify the degree of risk but noted that one of the studies showed a 40 percent increased risk of glioma (malignant brain cancer) among regular cellphone users who had used the devices for at least 30 minutes a day for the past 10 years.

University of Southern California researcher Jonathan Samet, who chaired the agency working group, said the new classification "means that there could be some risk... we need to keep a close watch for a link between cellphones and cancer risk".

Agency director Christopher Wild said: "It is important that additional research be conducted into the long-term, heavy use of mobile phones. Pending the availability of such information, it is important to take pragmatic measures to reduce exposure such as hands-free devices or texting."

In response to Morgan's concerns this week, Molewa said she had received a letter from the Department of Health indicating that it was "satisfied that the health of the general public is not being compromised" by exposure to cellphone base stations.

However, the Health Department letter was written in March (before the more recent classification).

He said Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi had failed to respond to similar written questions and was concerned that Molewa was "not being rigorous" in examining the new information.

A separate report published by the Council for Europe earlier this year also urged member states to take all reasonable measures to reduce exposure to electromagnetic fields, especially to radio frequencies from cellphones "and particularly the exposure to children and young people who seem to be most at risk from head tumours".

The council assembly also urged its 47 member states to encourage research into new forms of telecommunication which were just as efficient as mobile phones, but with less harmful health and environmental effects.

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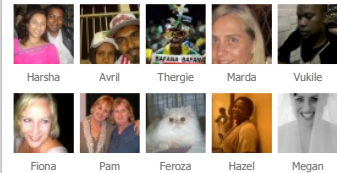
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