

Health Impact

Can radiation from cell towers and power lines hurt us?

Mission resident believes those who suffer from electromagnetic sensitivity know the answer.

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Special to the post

If you've driven down South Fraser Way to the Highway #1 on-ramp in the last six months, you may have noticed a new cellphone tower. Or you may not have — power lines and cellphone towers are such everyday things, often we fail to even notice them.

Not so for people with electromagnetic sensitivity. Headaches, fatigue, dizziness and even nausea are some of the symptoms of this ailment. The cause? Many believe it to be those towers and the levels of radiation they emit. Mission resident Robert Riedlinger believes this to be true, although he admits that he's no scientist. But after years of researching the subject, he thinks he can make an educated guess.

Riedlinger started getting headaches, loss of hearing and a general feeling of malaise when he moved to a home in Harrison Hot Springs, which was 350 feet from a TV and radio tower, with cellphone antennas. He heard a humming sound, which he pinpointed to the tower and deduced that it was indeed the tower that had something to do with the way he felt. "I felt so much pressure in my head," he says. "I had lots of calls from people with similar symptoms, so I knew I wasn't crazy," he says.

The retired Reidlinger felt better when he was away from home, and even went so far as to sleep in his car. Today he lives on acreage in Mission, away from all the towers in the district, including the ones located on Bear Mountain, Mount Marianne, the Public Works Building and the newest one near the RCMP detachment (according to superintendent of utilities Greg Giles).

Reidlinger has felt better ever since. But he hasn't forgotten, and wants to continue to spread the word about the potential harmful effects of these towers, especially on children. "An adult can look at the research and decide for themselves, but a child has no option," he says.

Such towers are under the jurisdiction of Industry Canada and Health Canada, and districts don't have much say in them, but there is a public consultation process generally available when a new tower is scheduled to go up. Jeffrey Meerman of Bell Canada points out that there is such a consultation process in Abbotsford, and when they put up the tower on South Fraser Way a few months ago, there was in fact very little feedback from residents about it.

"We always work with municipalities," he says, adding that the industry is regulated by the federal government and that Canada has some of the strictest standards. "Bell has thousands of cell sites around Canada that meet or exceed those health and safety regulations."

He says they do get people in some communities who protest against towers — such as the recent case of Chilliwack residents protesting a Telus tower — but he thinks there's a lot of misinformation out there on the subject. "Often people look on the internet, but anyone can put information on the internet that may or may not be scientifically valid."

But Riedlinger says he can point to study after study, mostly from the United Kingdom and Sweden, which have raised concerns about the health effects of towers, particularly in relation to cancer clusters near towers. And he gets e-mails from people all over Canada and the world who have experienced electromagnetic sensitivity around towers.

One such person is Dr. David Fancy of Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. "I currently sleep in a little camper trailer in an 80-acre woodlot 20 kilometres outside of town in order to get sufficient distance from cell, radio and other communications towers to be able to sleep," he says.

Fancy, who has an official diagnosis of electrohypersensitivity from the University of Toronto's Environmental Health Clinic, says "I have been able to improve significantly by staying away from electromagnetic emission sites ... I know a variety of other people within 10 kilometres of me who are living with the same condition and challenges. This is a very common affliction, and many people have less-severe symptoms that they attribute to something else such as multiple sclerosis (MS) or fibromyalgia."

Both Fancy and Riedlinger would like to see the Canadian government do more research and investigate the health impact of towers further. Health Canada has published Safety Code 6, a code regarding human exposure to radio frequency electromagnetic fields. The limits given in Safety Code 6 were arrived at after looking at many scientific studies on the health effects of RF energy exposure. Health Canada does admit, however, that "some studies claim that biological effects may occur at RF energy levels below the Safety Code 6 limits, but that these biological effects are not well established and their implications for human health need further study."

And that's all Riedlinger really wants — more research. That doesn't necessarily mean he wants society to go back into the dark ages — after all, cell phones have become a way of life today and billions of people around the world are not likely to give up their camera phones and Blackberries — but perhaps new technologies could be investigated, such as fibre optics, he says.

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