

IARC Monographs - Volume 102 Non-Ionizing Radiation, Part II: Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields [includes mobile telephones]

Dr Christopher Wild, Director, IARC, opens Monograph meeting on Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields [including mobile telephones]

Transcript of the podcast

First of all I would like to welcome you all to the International Agency for Research on Cancer and to Lyon. I would like to extend a particularly warm welcome on behalf of the Secretariat to those who are here in the Agency for the first time. Please excuse me while I spend a few moments making some introductory remarks which I hope will serve to set the tone for the forthcoming days.

The IARC Monographs are one of the most important areas of the Agency's activities. As I travel internationally I ask people what they look to the Agency for and the Monographs are always among the first things mentioned. It is a highly valued and respected program.

The program was initiated by the late Dr Lorenzo Tomatis and volume 1 appeared in 1972. The program still sits well with the core mission of the Agency, namely that of cancer prevention. Cancer prevention is thankfully increasingly being highlighted. Later this year the United Nations General Assembly will hold a high-level meeting on non-communicable diseases – only the second one ever on a health topic, the first being on HIV-AIDS. Prevention through avoidance of risk factors will be a major focus of the world leaders at that meeting. But of course one cannot prevent unless one first identifies causes and the Monographs are an important part of that process.

Inside the cover of the Monographs you will see stated that the Monograph is the “views and expert opinion of an IARC Working Group”. You are a part of the Working Group because you are an acknowledged expert, as testified through your scientific publication record. Your interpretations of the research findings in the field will differ, and indeed we seek a balance of views when establishing the Working Group, but you are chosen on the basis of your expertise. You have much evidence to assess across a range of disciplines and I am pleased that among the manuscripts to be considered are a number of recent ones from the IARC-led Interphone study.

If you are here it is not only also because of your complementary expertise and perspective, it is because none of the information you have provided on your Declaration of Interest form has led us to reconsider your participation. However, please review extremely carefully the completeness of your submission and respond to the opportunity to update your information at the start of this meeting, as will be explained by Dr Straif in a moment. Failure to disclose relevant information will serve the interests of no-one.

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A further key point to emphasize is that IARC does not write the Monograph. We assemble the Working Group and it is the Working Group which makes the evaluation. It is a process that has served well for close to 40 years and over 100 volumes; it is a process that has won respect for its integrity, through the midst of many challenging topics in the past and, I would expect, many more in the future. The Monographs are being widely used by national and international agencies as a source of information in their efforts to control cancer. It is worth valuing and protecting the service that this Agency rightly offers to public health as an international, independent and publicly funded organization.

Therefore the eyes of the world are upon you over the next 8 days. The eyes of the world will be certainly drawn to you after those 8 days are over. As the leading experts I ask you to remember who you are here to serve. Our responsibility as scientists is to the ordinary users of this technology, characterized recently by a young person who simply asked me "Is it safe to use my mobile phone?" Understandably, there is great interest from industry and there is great interest from a wide range of articulate advocacy groups. However, it is the image of this young person, an agnostic user, and their needs that I ask you to keep to the forefront of your minds in the coming days.

The fact that our Working Groups are made up of people outside the Agency means that we are reliant on the goodwill and generosity of scientists such as yourselves in giving up time and other intellectual commitments, both now and before the meeting for the public good. So thank you for being willing to support us in this way. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the willingness of your respective organizations in allowing you to spend part of your time to attend this meeting.

It is not all sacrifice. Participation in a Monograph meeting is rewarding and can even be enjoyable. We find that a mutual respect develops as Working Group members grapple with the scientific evidence together. This often leads to new collaborations and friendships. It can be, in a sense, a return to the basics of the scientific process itself. But it can be challenging.

I would like to share one personal recollection with you which is from the time I was a member of an IARC Working Group. I came to that meeting as an expert in my field, knowing, of course, that I had a good and accurate understanding of the topic. However, I had never before experienced such an atmosphere of what was effectively an open-discussion, real-time peer-review. There was an occasion when I was making an argument and I realized that the person opposite me had a more rigorous, defensible interpretation. There was a split second where I had to decide either to dig in my heels and defend my position or listen to and ultimately accept an alternative position.

Many scientists leave the Monograph meeting having learnt a lot. That IARC Monograph meeting made me a better scientist, I hope one of greater integrity and I know, one of more use to the public good. Therefore during this meeting I ask you to have the courage to listen, not only to speak.

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In closing let me reiterate my welcome to everyone. This is irrespective of your status at the meeting as Working Group Members and Invited Specialists assisting in the Working Group, Representatives or Observers or as part of the wider Secretariat. There has been a fair amount of comment on the balance of representation at this meeting. For the record let me state that other than in the case of journalists, we have turned away no applications from organizations wishing to have a presence here through Observers or Representatives. The organizations represented are those that stepped forward and asked to be here. At the same time Dr Straif will outline the guidelines for the participation of the various attendees and these guidelines will be strictly applied in order to protect the integrity of the evaluation.

Finally I would like to wish all the best to Dr Straif as Head of the Monographs Program, to Dr Baan as the Responsible Officer and the whole team in the Section of IARC Monographs. We have exceptional people working at this Agency and the Monographs team exemplifies that quality.