

Maine panel weighs cell phone cancer warning

By GLENN ADAMS (AP) – 4 hours ago

AUGUSTA, Maine — Ignoring the health risks of heavy cell phone use invites a cancer epidemic, supporters of a bill requiring manufacturers to put labels on mobile phones and packaging said Tuesday.

"We can do nothing and wait for the body count. That's what happened with smoking" before warnings on cigarette packs were mandated, David Carpenter, director of the Institute for Health and Environment at the University of Albany, told Maine lawmakers.

The Health and Human Services Committee held a hearing on a bill that would make Maine the first state to carry warnings that they can cause brain cancer, especially among children. Opponents dismissed research pointing to the risks and said the bill is more about politics than science.

The sponsor, Rep. Andrea Boland, said the United States lags behind other countries that have either mandated similar warnings or endorsed policies warning the public about cell phone use.

Carpenter, a Harvard Medical School graduate and researcher with expertise in electromagnetic fields, said the strongest evidence of cell phone dangers comes from Europe, where the devices have been in use longer than in the United States. He told lawmakers that the U.S. "may face an epidemic of brain cancer" if nothing is done to warn consumers of risks.

Boland, D-Sanford, said the risks diminish markedly if the phone is held away from the head.

Olle Johansson, a scientist at Karolinska Institute in Sweden, submitted testimony saying that "very serious biological changes" that include cancer risks have been noticed for years from exposure to low-frequency magnetic fields like those emitted from cell phones.

Supporters also included brain cancer patient and relatives of victims who said the disease was triggered by cell phone use.

"When you put that phone to your head, you are unknowingly playing Russian roulette," said Alan Marks of the San Francisco Bay area, who's been diagnosed with a brain tumor.

An industry group, TechAmerica, said Boland's bill "substitutes political judgment for the collective scientific judgment of experts around the world."

Kim Allman, senior vice president of the Washington, D.C.-based group, said in a statement that scientific evidence so far does not indicate a public health risk and added that warning labels would be misleading and confusing.

Gov. John Baldacci's administration also opposes the bill.

Dora Anne Mills, director of the state Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said research by federal health and safety agencies does not justify a warning, although she acknowledged that uncertainty exists about the effects of long-term cell use.

Mills said the federal Food and Drug Administration is already taking precautionary action by urging the industry to do further research and to design cell phones to minimize exposure to risks.

But Mills said that if the state was to require warnings on everything with undefined risks, everything "from apples to xylophones" would have to be labeled.

The committee is expected to review the bill further in about a week.

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