

Cell phone health warning debated in Augusta: Convenience vs. radiation

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Augusta, Maine -- Cell phones are virtually everywhere in our society, providing wireless, pocket-sized safety and convenience to great-grandparents, business professionals, soccer moms, teenagers and, increasingly, young children. But are they safe?

On Tuesday, the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee heard from national advocates claiming that cell phone use is linked to brain cancer and other disorders and calling for a prominent and graphic warning label on every unit sold in Maine.

Maine would become the first state with such a requirement.

Opponents, including Maine's top public health official as well as representatives of the wireless industry, called the proposal misguided and inflammatory and said it would conflict with federal regulatory policies.

The bill, LD 1706, sponsored by Rep. Andrea Boland, D-Sanford, would require cell phone manufacturers to apply a permanent, nonremovable warning label to every unit sold in Maine. The label would cover at least 30 percent of the plain area of the phone and caution users to hold the unit several inches away from their heads or to use earphone-and-speaker technology.

Boland testified that a warning label is an easy way to alert people to the dangers cell phones can pose. "No one is suggesting we don't use cell phones," she said. "We're only suggesting people use them safely."

The label also would include a color graphic of the brain of a 5-year-old child showing the extent to which radiation from a cell phone is absorbed. The illustration would be drawn from the recent research of professor Om Gandhi of the University of Utah, who has studied the relative absorption and effect of cell phone radiation on the brains of children and adults. Gandhi was among a number of scientific experts who traveled to Augusta on Tuesday for the public hearing before the HHS committee.

Several individuals told the committee stories of personal tragedy, including Ellie and Alan Marks, who traveled to Augusta from their home in San Francisco. Realtor Alan Marks told lawmakers he was diagnosed two years ago with a malignant brain tumor on the right side of his brain -- the same side as the ear he used most when on his cell phone.

"It was malignant and it was my death sentence," he said. Marks said physicians and scientists "around the world" have determined that the tumor was directly attributable to his long-term use of a cellular telephone.

Marks said that if he had had any idea that cell phones have been linked with brain cancers, he would have altered his use of the devices.

"I wish I could go back 23 years and start over by never holding that thing to my head," he said. "But I can't. All I can do is let others know my story." Marks accused the cell phone industry of denying and disregarding growing evidence that use of the devices is related to brain tumor development.

That evidence includes a recent study by Dr. Franz Adlkofer, a biologist and professor of internal medicine in Munich, Germany. Adlkofer told the committee that the kind of electromagnetic radiation emitted by cell phones damages DNA strands, setting the stage for many disorders, including cancer.

"Special attention should be given to the most frequent users of this technology, children and adolescents, who are also the most vulnerable members of our society," he said in his testimony in support of a warning label.

Professor Devra Davis of Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York said recent studies of people who have used cell phones for 10 years or longer show a clear connection to cancers of the brain, salivary glands and acoustic nerves, as well as less deadly problems ranging from reduced sperm count to insomnia.

Davis cautioned that older safety studies referenced by the cell phone industry looked at subjects who had been using the technology only for a few years. She said it can take 20 or 30 years for cancer to develop and that increased use among youngsters poses a heightened risk.

Local supporters of the bill included Dr. Meryl Nass, a physician from Bar Harbor who specializes in toxic exposures and "odd illnesses," and Michael Belliveau of the Maine-based Environmental Health Strategy Center. In his testimony, Belliveau said the "three irrefutable facts" about cell phones -- that they expose the human brain to radiation, that radiation causes biological changes in human cells, and that some studies link cell phone use to brain cancer in humans -- are reason enough to alert consumers to the potential dangers of the technology and encourage them to reduce exposure among children and adopt the use of hands-free devices.

But Dr. Dora Anne Mills, director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, referenced a number of U.S. and international agencies and said there is not sufficient evidence of harm to require a warning label on cell phones.

The state could require warnings on "everything from apples to xylophones," which would only result in "an overwhelmed and turned-off public," she said. Mills noted that cell phones are often key to providing safety and security for children and their families.

Dane Snowden of CTIA, the international association for the wireless communications industry, also spoke against the measure on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence of danger. The warning specified in the bill "strongly suggests a safety concern that is unfounded, unsupported and contrary to the views of international health organizations and government agencies regarding the safety of wireless devices," he said in his testimony. He also said the measure would violate federal rules regarding states' ability to regulate telecommunications technology.

Curtis Picard of the Maine Merchants Association argued the warning could drive down cell phone sales, adversely affecting Maine businesses.

The committee's work session on Boland's bill is scheduled for 1 p.m. Tuesday, March 9, in Room 209 of the Cross State Office Building.