

GOVERNMENT MEMBERS COMMENTS

1.1 The Government members wish to make the following comments about the Report.

1.2 While there may be some *biological* effects from low levels of RF radiation, Government members consider that, in contrast to the conclusions drawn at paras 2.104 and 2.140, it would be more appropriate to conclude from the evidence that the possibility of biological effects (and thus possibly *health* effects) argues for a precautionary approach.

1.3 Government members are concerned at the Report's lengthy criticism of the NHMRC processes and the funding decisions made. Government members do, however, agree with the conclusion, which was only grudgingly reached in the Report, that the Committee did not find evidence that the NHMRC has been deficient or biased in its allocation of the research funds (see para 3.101).

1.4 Government members support the conclusion, grudgingly arrived at in the Report, that the Committee did not find evidence of industry bias within the NHMRC (see para 3.80 of the Report).

1.5 Government members are opposed to the enormous increase in funding for research – to \$40 million – recommended in the Report.

1.6 Government members note that while the Report reaches the conclusion that the RF standard should be set by a process similar to that adopted by Standards Australia, this process was unsuccessful in revising the Standard recently.

1.7 Government members also note that the Report has ruled ARPANSA out of the standards setting process apparently because of the history of the Nuclear Safety Bureau, its precursor (see para 4.123) and because there are members with industry interests on the ARPANSA working group. However, it is not clear to Government members why that should be considered inappropriate for ARPANSA but acceptable in the Standards Australia process. Government members support the role of ARPANSA in the standards setting process.

1.8 Government members support the following recommendations:

Recommendation 2.4 — testing, labelling and regulating shielding and hands-free devices

Many of these products are sold on the basis of claims that they reduce electromagnetic radiation. Consumers need to be protected against unscrupulous merchants who take advantage of people's fears, and especially against those products which, rather than decreasing emissions, may have the effect of increasing them. In addition, Government members are concerned

that the use of these devices may negate the compliant status of the product to which the shielding device is attached. This situation needs to be addressed.

Recommendation 2.6 — development of an industry code of practice for handling consumer health complaints

Government members consider that the current situation, where it is unclear where consumers should go with a health complaint related to mobile phone use, is a cause for concern. Government members consider that it is important for the telecommunications industry to be prepared to respond to consumer concerns by having appropriate procedures in place for dealing with mobile phone related health complaints.

Recommendation 2.7 — the establishment of a centralised complaints mechanism

Government members, while recognising that research is being undertaken to investigate the causes of a range of symptoms attributed to mobile phone use, nevertheless consider that the development of a database of reports of adverse health effects from mobile phones and other sources of radiofrequency radiation would assist researchers in formulating future research hypotheses, and contribute to public confidence in measures being adopted to minimise health risks associated with EMR.

Recommendation 2.8 — sponsoring of consensus conferences by the Commonwealth Government

Government members believe that the perceived disenfranchisement of some members of the public may be redressed by enabling their participation in conferences aimed at informing the community about the current status of research into the effects of electromagnetic radiation and the implications for human health.

1.9 Government members make the following comments in relation to the remaining recommendations:

Recommendation 2.1 — encouragement of additional research into extremely low frequencies and TV/radio tower exposure

To the extent that this recommendation relies on the recent ‘Doll’ report, the issue is one of an *association* between *magnetic fields* and childhood leukaemia, not powerlines per se. The Committee did not hear much evidence on this issue and, in this light, the basis for the recommendation could be queried. In addition, the Committee’s terms of reference specifically relate to telecommunications applications, and therefore this recommendation falls outside the scope of this inquiry.

A national survey of domestic magnetic fields would, however, be useful.

Recommendation 2.2 — precautionary measures for the placement of powerlines

See comments on Recommendation 2.1. While the association between magnetic fields and childhood leukaemia needs to be taken seriously, the strength of the evidence and the effect, if real, may not warrant expensive further precautions at this stage. In addition, the Committee was informed that the electricity industry already adopts a prudent avoidance approach in the design and operation of its electricity generation, transmission and distribution systems.

Furthermore, the Committee's terms of reference specifically relate to telecommunications applications and therefore this recommendation falls outside the scope of this inquiry.

Recommendation 2.3 — that the Commonwealth Government considers developing material to advise parents and children of the potential risks associated with mobile phone use

It is debatable whether there is such a 'growing body of research' referred to in this recommendation. The public should be made aware that mobile phones do emit electromagnetic radiation and that they should be used prudently. Therefore, the development of independent material to advise people about what is known about mobile phone radiation is supported.

Recommendation 2.5 — that the Government review the Telecommunications (Low-impact Facilities) Determination 1997

The LIF Determination was last reviewed in 1999 and that an ACIF (Australian Communications Industry Forum) Code currently being developed provides for greater consultation with community groups on the siting and operation of telecommunications equipment including low impact facilities.

Recommendation 2.9 — listing of a study into *p53* mice to encourage future research applications

It is questionable whether the Committee has the expertise to make a judgment about the value of such a study.

Recommendation 3.1 — collection of \$5 per annum for each mobile phone in use

The Government members believe it is appropriate that the present levy and funding (\$1 million per annum) continue.

Recommendation 3.2 — maintenance of \$4 million per annum for the NHMRC-administered research program, with the balance to be used by the CSIRO to establish a research program and specialised research unit

See comments on Recommendation 3.1. It should be noted that the CSIRO Division of Telecommunications and Industrial Physics has an annual budget of \$60 million and apparently spends none of it on RF health research. If the CSIRO sees such research as a priority, presumably it would have already undertaken such a program.

Recommendation 4.1 — formulation and administration of the radiofrequency standard by a process similar to that used by Standards Australia

The Parliament has set up ARPANSA and the Radiation Health Committee to, inter alia, prepare national standards to protect the health of people against harmful effects of radiation. ARPANSA's expertise and international experience in setting standards are considerable. In addition, the ARPANSA process includes expert independent working groups involving people from community groups. There is a clear process of public input going on at present with the draft RF standard. Given ARPANSA's resources, experience and statutory backing, it is the Government members' view that ARPANSA should be left to get on with the job.

Recommendation 4.2 — that the level of 200 microwatts per square centimetre in the expired Interim Standard be retained in the Australian Standard

The Standard is based upon known health effects largely based upon heating effects. The Standard should be set scientifically on this basis, and if earlier Standards were incorrectly based, they should not stand simply on the basis of a precautionary approach. A Standard is 'black letter law'. Precautionary approaches – that may be warranted by scientific uncertainty about athermal effects – should apply outside the Standard.

As part of its formulation of an Australian Standard, ARPANSA re-examined the basis of the Standard by reviewing standards throughout the world. It determined, from a scientific point of view, what would be the most applicable standard. Government members support the approach taken.

1.10 In addition to the recommendations already supported, Government members believe that purchasers of mobile phones should have information to allow them to make informed choices about personal exposures resulting from their use of mobile phones. Government members therefore support the labelling of mobile phones and information at point of sale along similar lines to that recommended by the Stewart Report (see para 4.203 of this Report).

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