

Wi-Fi issue in schools needs review

Letter to the Editor

Thursday December 9, 2010

(Re: 'Students with Wi-Fi fears won't be expelled: official' in the Dec. 2 edition of the Examiner)

By way of introduction, I would like to make it clear that I am not involved in any way with either side in this dispute. Also, although I have been a general paediatrician for over 20 years, I am not an expert in the field of the effects of currently experienced levels of electromagnetic and/or radio wave irradiation of children -- but I suspect that such experts probably do not yet exist.

The superintendent of District 5 of Simcoe County District School Board, John Dance, is quoted as saying that if the reaction [that concerns the parents of affected children] is an "allergic reaction" then the school requires documentation on why and how to deal with it -- very much like peanut allergies.

Unfortunately, this indicates that the superintendent's understanding of this issue is woefully inadequate.

It is well-recognized that some people are hypersensitive to items in the environment that others are oblivious to.

Some of these sensitivities are well understood and follow relatively well-understood patterns of pathophysiology -- allergies to peanuts, cats, ragweed, etc. are common examples.

Other well-known hypersensitivities such as those to perfumes, fluorescent lighting, etc. do not follow any known pathophysiologic pathway, but nevertheless have eventually become accepted by the public to the point where many workplaces will readily ban these items if requested.

Hypersensitivity to electromagnetic or intensive radio wave transmission (such as in the industrial-strength Wi-Fi placed in some of the schools in question) likely falls into this latter category-- for now.

Research is underway into understanding this phenomenon, but I suspect it will be many years before enough information is available to satisfy the school board's apparent need to have unequivocal guidelines.

I am sympathetic to the board's dilemma of being asked to remove the very effective and welcome technological advance of Wi-Fi from the schools for reasons which it does not fully understand or personally experience.

It is my opinion, however, that our school boards have a mandate to not only educate our children but also, above all, to provide all children with a safe and healthy learning environment.

Removing Wi-Fi or, at the very least, restricting its use when there appears to be an apparent hypersensitivity, is unlikely to be a prohibitively expensive endeavour.

It is unreasonable to delay action until government regulatory agencies gather enough information on relatively new technology before acting.

How long did it take to ban smoking from schools?

Our school boards can, and should, be held to a higher moral standard.

If you do not have enough information to make a perfect decision, then err on the side of caution.

The first rule of medicine is 'First, do no Harm'. Wise words no matter what the profession.

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