

Nation wired into study of phone emissions

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TAXPAYERS will fund a five-year research project to determine if emissions from mobile phone towers damage the health of residents. Federal Health Minister Kay Patterson yesterday announced the establishment of a \$2.5 million electromagnetic energy research centre in Victoria to examine the health risks posed by the towers in built-up areas. The move follows years of community anger at the construction of the towers, with fears about the potential health effects of exposure to radio emissions. "Although no one has conclusively established a health risk through the use of mobile phones, we need to broaden and strengthen Australia's research effort in this area," Senator Patterson said. The centre will be funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council and based at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Researchers from five institutions will contribute to the work which will be led by Professor Irena Cosic. The centre also will provide career development programs for researchers studying the effects of electromagnetic energy.

The Australian Communications Authority late last year signed a new code of practice aimed at improving the consultation process when phone companies install facilities like the towers. Under the code, phone companies face fines of up to \$250,000 for not complying with the ACA's tough new standards. The standards were designed to ease community concerns by giving local councils and the public greater participation in decisions made by phone carriers. The code sets guidelines for the siting, design and operation of telecommunications facilities, lists obligatory steps for planning, installing and operating the facilities and requires carriers to develop a complaint-handling process. National Health and Medical Research Council chief executive Alan Pettigrew said the issue of electromagnetic emissions from mobile phone towers was a matter of great community concern, particularly considering there were about 13 million mobile phones in Australia. "There is a large amount of research looking at the possible health risks around the world but there has been no conclusive evidence," he said. "There is a high level of public interest in this field within Australia and the centre will be able to contribute to the world-wide research from an Australian perspective."

PHONE FEARS

*Telecommunications carriers claim there is widespread misunderstanding about the science of electromagnetic radiation, saying the emissions that come from mobile phone towers are much weaker than those from old-style radio towers.

* The Australian Communications Authority can fine mobile phone companies up to \$250,000 if they do not design and operate their base stations to minimise electromagnetic radiation emissions. Companies also are compelled to provide regular emission reports.

* Despite many studies on the issue, there has been no conclusive proof that mobile phone tower emissions are a health hazard.