

'Cancer cluster' panic - Authorities say uni tumours a coincidence

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HEALTH authorities are trying to calm workers in central Melbourne, insisting there is no evidence of a link between mobile phone towers and a string of brain tumours in an office block. The cases of seven people, who worked on the top floors of the RMIT university building and who have been diagnosed with brain tumours in the past seven years, were no more than "coincidence". But former workers are struck with panic over the apparent cancer cluster.

"A staff member who was situated behind me had a brain tumour; a staff member who was in front of me in the office had a brain tumour," one distraught former staff member said. Despite the panic, some staff returned to work yesterday, although the university had shut down the top two floors while it awaited an investigation into mobile phone radiation emissions coming from towers on the roof. Authorities will also test air and water in the building after five workers were diagnosed with brain tumours in the past month. "To be quite frank, I think it's an unfortunate coincidence," epidemiologist Michael Abramson told The Weekend Australian. "There were five benign tumours and two malignant cases (and) that tells me immediately that they haven't all got the same tumour and that makes it much less likely that there's a common cause," said Professor Abramson, from the Australian Centre for Radiofrequency Bioeffects Research. His view was backed by the most comprehensive research, conducted across 13 countries, into mobile phone usage and brain tumours, which failed to show a link. "The bottom line is there doesn't appear to be a consistent association between the exposure to radiofrequency from mobile telephones and the risk of glioma, which is the commonest malignant brain tumour," Professor Abramson said of the evidence to date.

However, the National Tertiary Education Union demanded yesterday that no staff return to the two floors until they were found to be safe. A Melbourne specialist in occupational environmental medicine, Bruce Hocking, said the towers on the RMIT building should be investigated. But he said it would be unusual for radiofrequency fields to be moving down into the building, rather than out. "We shouldn't be putting our attention solely on the mobile phone towers," Dr Hocking said. Apart from looking at the personal history of affected staff members, he said other aspects of the Bourke Street building should be examined. "X-rays are known to be associated with brain tumours and there may be other things like unusual chemicals which, in experimental situations in animals, can be used to cause brain tumours," he said.

"Has there been some unusual usage of that building or some contamination in there which has contributed to this?" As the staff union demanded answers as to why the two top floors had still not been formally closed down, there were mixed reactions from past and present RMIT staff. "I'm fine, it's all quite calm," one employee, who had moved to a new office space, told The Weekend Australian yesterday. But others were clearly disturbed by the recent events. A former RMIT employee of seven years, Louise, complained that no one could help her when she rang a university hotline that had been set up for concerned staff and students. "I asked them what they were doing about contacting ex-employees, and they said, 'we don't know'," Louise said yesterday.