LEARNING: York parents protest wireless in schools

Hard to hide from Wi-Fi: expert

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You can't escape wireless signals, according to a provincial expert on the subject.

The reality is, no matter where you work, live or play, you are exposed radio frequencies emitted by wireless networks, Public Health Ontario environmental and occupational health director Dr. Ray Copes said.

In his apartment, his computer picks up at least 19 wireless networks in his building, meaning even if he disconnected his own wireless network, he would still be exposed to the frequencies from outside sources, he said.

"You would be hard-pressed to find a place where you wouldn't be exposed to some type of radio frequency," he said. "In remote rural areas, if you can get a television or radio signal, you are still being exposed. Even though the levels are quite low, it's still there."

A group of York Region parents, who gathered to protest in front of the York Region District School Board offices in Aurora earlier this week, is demanding wireless networks be pulled from local schools. The parents fear the radio frequencies will harm children, despite messages from Health Canada and the Ontario Health Ministry deeming the levels emitted in schools as safe.

Oak Ridges parent Lynnette Haralampopoulos recommends concerned parents participate in Wi-Fi-free Wednesday, when parents choose to give their children a mid-week break from the effects of Wi-Fi exposure by keeping them home from school.

The act is little more than a protest, Dr. Copes said, because the physical benefit is minimal.

Everything from wireless computer networks, garage door openers and even baby monitors emit radio frequencies, all at low enough levels to be deemed not hazardous to your health, he added.

"Wi-Fi is all around us," he said. "Our everyday exposure is considerable and removing yourself from one environment doesn't mean you are heading to an exposure-free environment."

With more and more public spaces, such as restaurants and coffee shops, offering Wi-Fi services and even public transit providers considering the service, there are very few, if any, places to escape, Dr. Copes said.

Health Canada states as long as the radio frequency energy emitted from Wi-Fi equipment remains below established safety limits, there is no convincing scientific evidence the equipment is dangerous to children.

On the other side of the debate, the World Health Organization produced a statement in the spring, reclassifying radio frequencies emitted by wireless devices as possibly carcinogenic and the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe recommended schools and classrooms give preference to wired Internet connections and strictly regulate the use of cellphones by children on school premises.

There isn't conclusive evidence regarding the long-term effects, Ms Haralampopoulos said. She encourages parents across the region to educate themselves and make their own decisions.

To get in touch with the parent group e-mail wifihazards@hotmail.ca For Ontario statement visit health.gov.on.ca/en/news/bulletin/2010/cmoh_wifi.aspx

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