

Letter about Wi-Fi in a school, from a parent to a school principal

December 2010

..... (School Principal)

I realize that Wi-Fi in the schools is an increasingly controversial and divisive topic, but I trust you will read the following with an open mind, as I write as a concerned parent.

A few nights ago, I attended a public meeting designed to provide information to concerned parents regarding the use of Wi-Fi in the school system. I will preface the rest of this letter by noting that I was at Parent Council the night of the Wi-Fi presentation, and while I was in no way involved in organizing that presentation, I was shocked by what I learned, and this motivated me to try to learn more.

My concerns about the current situation, with the school board poised to quietly install Wi-Fi in our children's schools, are many. First and foremost, of course, are the potential health risks associated with prolonged radio frequency radiation exposure. I have heard the school board repeatedly defer to Health Canada and Safety Code 6, yet many experts in the field feel that the Safety Code 6 limits are far too high, and do not sufficiently measure all potential effects of microwave radiation exposure. There have been NO long-term studies of the effect of chronic microwave radiation exposure on children, because, in the words of Health Canada's Beth Pieteron, "there are large ethical issues on conducting studies specifically on children", yet Health Canada condones exposing our children to this new, insufficiently studied technology. The fact of the matter is that installing Wi-Fi in schools and then watching to see what happens to our children IS an experiment, one for which I do not consent to the use of my children.

Health Canada's repeated reference to "the weight of evidence" offers me no comfort: Using a "weight of evidence" approach, 40% of the studies being done could demonstrate adverse health effects to Wi-Fi, yet "the weight of evidence" would still favour using the technology. Health Canada is not infallible, and has been wrong many, many times in the past, sometimes with disastrous consequences: lead-based paint, Thalidomide, Diethylstilbestrol (DES), smoking, AIDS, fetal alcohol, bisphenol A plastic, etc., etc. Consequently, Health Canada's seal of approval is insufficient for me, as Health Canada has shown itself to be slow to change its stance, even in the face of mounting evidence. As a timely example, at this time, Health Canada still approves the use of many pesticides that our community, including K.P.R. schools, has collectively decided to discontinue.

Allow me to use fetal alcohol exposure to illustrate a huge duality in Health Canada's risk management approach. Given the knowledge available at this time, I think everyone would agree that both fetal alcohol exposure and radiation exposure are harmful: The question for both is how much is safe, and how much is harmful? With fetal alcohol exposure, Health Canada's message is clear: "If you are pregnant, or planning to become pregnant in the near future, do not drink alcohol. No amount or type of alcohol is considered safe." Yet, in the face of mounting evidence that Wi-Fi exposure in children may not be safe in the previously accepted "dosage", Health Canada does not see fit to adopt the same cautious approach, and in fact, supports exposing our kids to even more microwave radiation than ever before.

The Precautionary Principle is, in the words of Health Canada's Beth Pieteron, "a public policy approach for risk management of possible, but unproven, adverse health effects". It should be invoked "when there is only some evidence, and it's not conclusive" that something is harmful. The Precautionary Principle was the reason for bisphenol A plastic being pulled from store shelves a few years back. Well in fact, there is evidence that Wi-Fi exposure is harmful. True, some of it is anecdotal, and there is evidence supporting both sides of the argument, but there is an increasing body of scientific evidence that suggests there is cause for concern regarding Wi-Fi exposure: This would seem to fit the criteria for the Precautionary Principle, yet strangely, Health Canada has still not seen fit to invoke it.

My second major area of concern centres around the issue of informed consent. I work in the field of health care, and I quite literally cannot get a patient out of bed without their informed consent. A technician most certainly could not do a CAT scan on a patient without their informed consent, nor could a surgeon perform surgery (and please note that "informed" means that the patient must be informed of the benefits and the risks associated with that particular test/procedure/therapy). Similarly, I think most people would agree that no one has the right to expose non-smokers to second hand cigarette smoke without the non-smoker's consent, because of the health risks involved. Why does that same need for consent not apply to Wi-Fi exposure? I find it curious that the school/school board can not publish my child's picture, can not teach them sex ed., can not take them on a field trip, or even for a walk around the block without my consent.... yet the board appears to feel that it has the right to expose my children to microwave radiation without my consent. Ironically, when I returned home from the Wi-Fi information presentation, I found in my 13-year old's knapsack, a consent from the Health Unit, which they need me to sign so that my teenager can fill out a survey. Yet that same Health Unit condones exposing her to Wi-Fi, despite the question marks surrounding its safety.

The Nuremberg Code of 1947 was designed to guide researchers by determining some ethical guidelines. One might argue that it does not apply in this case, as we are not talking

about official "research"; but I maintain that it does, as the use of Wi-Fi in schools, with no previous research to support its safety in this context, is in fact an experiment. The Nuremberg Code states, among many other things, that voluntary consent of the research subject is essential, and that the subject must be informed of any potential risks associated with the research. Yet my right to deny consent for my children to be exposed to Wi-Fi is not being considered, despite the words of Health Canada's Beth Pieterston: "I think parents have to make decisions all the time about the safety of their kids and the well-being of their families. I think they have to seek good information, talk to their health care providers, and get information from all sources. Science isn't black and white. There are always going to be different sides. They need to make their own decisions."

My third major area of concern is around the issue of information: The K.P.R.D.S.B. has not been forthcoming with either their plans to install Wi-Fi, nor with any information to educate parents about the potential risks. I received untold notices home about the switch to balanced day, the change in bell times, grade 3/6 testing, and most recently, the change in the report card format. None of these posed any potential risk to the health of my children, yet the school and the school board extended quite an effort to keep me informed. In contrast, there has not been one word of information sent home by either the school or the school board regarding either the installation of Wi-Fi, or any of the question marks or concerns surrounding its safety. In fact from what I have seen, the school board is quite actively trying to suppress the dissemination of any information on this topic. I find this suspicious, arrogant, and unethical, and it certainly appears to me that the school board is trying to put one over on the public: Parents are not protesting this technology plan, because the vast majority of them know nothing about it.

To further that point, I noted in the minutes of the KPRDSB Board Meeting that amid concerns over the safety of Wi-Fi in the schools, "A trustee asked administration for assurance that the Board's insurance policy will adequately cover any health issues that may arise related to Wi-Fi. (A superintendent) confirmed that the Board's liability insurance coverage currently covers up to \$20 million ... Director Hick noted that it would be difficult to include every potential or perceived hazard in any insurance policy. It was stressed that due diligence is taking place, and accepted authority say there is no reason for concern." In other words, the board seems to think that Wi-Fi is OK, but thought they had better just check up on their liability insurance... just in case. That doesn't sound to me like my children's' best interests are being placed at the top of the priority list.

My fourth and final area of concern is that there is quite literally no need to install Wi-Fi in the schools, particularly given its great expense. Despite the potential risks to their health, Wi-Fi will not allow my children to do one thing at school that they cannot already do with the computers in their current hardwired state. Of course, a person using a laptop could do so at any location within the school, but the fact is that students using laptops are the rare

exceptions to the rule (in my previous job, I was one of the professionals whose job it was to identify technology needs for special needs students, so I know first-hand how reluctant the board is to hand out laptop computers). Just because we can install Wi-Fi does not mean that we should. Schools and public buildings in several European countries are now removing Wi-Fi because of health concerns: Can we not learn from their mistakes, rather than repeat them?

I have heard the arguments that radiofrequency radiation is all around us, so it is silly to think that Wi-Fi in the schools would make any significant difference to my children's health. That argument is akin to saying that because there is air pollution all around us, I might as well smoke. Or that since a person is overweight, he/she may as well order the large platter of wings. Just because there are hazards and threats to my children's health that I cannot control does not mean that I should passively accept those that I can control. I can control their exposure to microwave radiation: I do so in my home, and I am asking you to help me do so in their school environment, by holding off on implementing Wi-Fi until we know more about the long-term safety of the technology.

St. Vincent-Euphrasia Elementary School in Meaford recently allowed their parent council to conduct a referendum on the issue of Wi-Fi: The parents of that school spoke very clearly, with almost 90% voting to have Wi-Fi removed from that school. In your position as interim principal, you are in a powerful position, in that you can allow parents to freely receive information and have their say, rather than just towing the party line, and following the school board's agenda. There are simply too many question marks around the safety of Wi-Fi, and I strongly feel that we must, for the sake of our children, proceed with extreme caution, rather than pursuing "progress" at any cost.

Thank you for your consideration on this matter.

Yours truly,

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