

## **Tumours spark call for tighter controls**

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### **RMIT CANCER SCARE**

CALLS grew yesterday for Federal Government control of mobile phone towers, after it emerged that medium-sized stations are exempt from planning permits.

City authorities expressed concern amid fears that a spate of brain tumours linked to the RMIT University business school was set to grow.

The university yesterday revealed it was investigating claims that more illnesses are linked to the Bourke Street building, where seven staff have developed brain tumours since 1999.

Five of the seven affected work on the top floor of the 17-storey building, prompting concerns that the tumours were caused by Telstra towers that have been on the roof for a decade. The two other cases involved staff working on the 11th and 14th floors.

It is believed two staff with malignant tumours continue to work at the university. Tumours in the other five were benign.

Amid wildly varying rumours about the number of people affected, RMIT chief operating officer Steve Somogyi said more people had come forward with illnesses but it was too soon to say whether they were connected.

The university agreed to shut the top two floors of the business school on Thursday after four tumours were discovered in the past two weeks, the most recent on Wednesday night.

No definitive medical link has been made between radiation from mobile phone towers and cancer, though doctors and researchers said a cluster of seven tumours in one workplace was unusual and should be investigated.

City leaders called on Communications Minister Helen Coonan to give councils planning control over mobile phone towers.

Victorian Local Governance Association chief executive Andrew Rowe said the towers should be subject to permits regardless of whether there was a proven health risk. There are 169 towers in the Melbourne CBD alone. Across the state, there are 32 mobile phone towers in hospital grounds, and six in schools.

Senator Coonan announced last July that Australia's mobile phone carriers would have to consult communities over tower locations, but stopped short of giving councils planning control. She did not respond to the calls yesterday.

The Mobile Carriers Forum, which represents Telstra, Hutchison, Optus and Vodafone, said carriers were required to consult the public over sites.

Australian Communications and Media Authority spokesman Donald Robertson said towers were checked every three to five years to ensure they met radiation standards.

WorkCover yesterday visited RMIT to begin its investigation, and the university began testing electromagnetic radiation emissions and air quality on the 16th and 17th floors. Those floors are supposed to be shut for a fortnight, but some staff kept working on the 16th.

RMIT Student Union occupational health and safety representative Liz Thompson said administrative staff had been told they could not work from home, and no alternative space had been found for them.

The university last night opened a second medical help line for staff, students and their families on 1300 361 008. The general help line is 1800 155 945.

## THE STORY SO FAR

1999

- Brain tumour in RMIT Business school staff member working on level 17 of Bourke Street campus.

2001

- Second case diagnosed on same level. Investigation finds radiation and air quality levels in the building are inside guidelines.

April 11, 2006

- Revealed third level 17 staffer has a brain tumour. University calls Department of Human Services, Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency and **Australian Centre for RadioFrequency Bioeffects Research** for advice.

April 19

- Staff on level 17 told of third case.

May 2

- Unconfirmed reports of two more tumours. Confirmed two days later.

May 4

- Kilpatrick and Associates occupational hygienists called in to test the building. Southern Medical Services forensic and health physicians asked to look at tumour sufferers.

May 10

- Sixth and seventh case revealed.

May 11

- Top two floors of RMIT Business closed for testing after calls from the academics' union. More than 100 staff told to leave.

May 12

- More staff come forward claiming they have illnesses.

## PHONE TOWERS

- Low-impact towers have a maximum height of 6.5 metres.
- High-impact towers are usually concrete poles or lattice towers between 25 and 30 metres high.
- Electromagnetic energy describes the movement of electric and magnetic energy. Radiofrequency EME is emitted by artificial sources such as mobile phone base stations, broadcast towers, and electronic equipment.
- A regulatory body says the maximum radio frequency radiation level found next to base station towers is less than two microwatts per square centimetre. Its recommended safe exposure limit for people is 450 microwatts.