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QUESTIONS ON NOTICE - World Health Organisation (Question No. 1879) World Health Organisation (Question No. 1879)

Senator Ludlam asked the Minister representing the Minister for Health, upon notice, on 12 June 2012:

1) Given that on 31 May 2011 the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Agency for Research on Cancer classified radiofrequency electromagnetic fields as a Group 2B carcinogen, and the inability of the Australian telecommunication industry to obtain public liability insurance for potential health effects of electromagnetic radiation (EMR), what financial provision is the Australian Government making to cover future public liability claims and health costs for Australians for illnesses caused by EMR.

2) Given that, for more than 10 years, Switzerland has been operating with an EMR standard that is 1 per cent of the current Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency standard (proving this to be both technically and economically viable), why is Australia not adopting this precautionary approach in light of the WHO classification of radiofrequency electromagnetic fields as a Group 2B carcinogen.

Senator Ludwig: The Minister for Health has provided the following answer to the honourable senator's question:

1) The Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA) is aware that the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified radiofrequency electromagnetic fields as Group 2B or 'possibly carcinogenic to humans', based on limited evidence on wireless phone use and certain brain tumours. The IARC found evidence on exposure from mobile phone base stations and cancer to be inadequate.

We recognise that the IARC classification can be a concern to the community. Of reassurance to the public should be that ARPANSA gives consideration to these issues and offers advice on ways to reduce personal exposures from handsets.

Exposures to the radiofrequency electromagnetic fields from mobile phones and base

stations are regulated by the Australian Communications and Media Authority to levels set by ARPANSA in its Radiation Protection Standard for Maximum Exposure Levels to Radiofrequency Fields 3 kHz to 300 GHz (2002) (ARPANSA Standard). This Standard includes a precautionary requirement to minimise unnecessary public exposure to radiofrequency fields. Typical exposures to the public from mobile phone base stations are well below international and Australian exposure limits and far below the localised exposures from mobile phone handsets.

2) In Australia, although there are no precautionary limits per se, the ARPANSA exposure standard requires a minimisation of public radiofrequency fields exposure "which is unnecessary or incidental to achievement of service objectives or process requirements, provided this can be readily achieved at reasonable expense." This is in line with the WHO's recommendations.