

Wireless Radiation Safety Council

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For Immediate Release

Statement by Kathy McDermid, occupational therapist and parent, Peterborough, Ontario

My name is Kathy McDermid, and I am the parent of two children who attend James Strath P. S. in Peterborough. I am here to speak to the fact that our school board is committing grave ethical transgressions in implementing its plan to install wireless internet, or Wi-Fi, in its schools.

I am not a doctor or a scientist, although I am a health care professional. I believe my professional background enables me to speak with some knowledge about medical ethics. Medical ethics are a set of principles that guide the practice of medicine and medical research. It is a vast field, which rests on three pillars: The Precautionary Principle, Informed Consent, and Transparency.

The precautionary principle is a core value of the health sciences – we recognize it most readily as part of the doctors' Hippocratic Oath, which states "First, do no harm". A more technical definition advises that "if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing harm to the public or to the environment, in the absence of scientific consensus that the action or policy is harmful, the burden of proof that it is not harmful falls on those taking the action." In other words, activities that present potential for significant harm, even if evidence is limited and contradictory, should be prohibited until the proponent of the activity can prove that there is no risk of harm. In lay terms, this means we have a responsibility to err on the side of caution.

Implicit in this, is that there is a social responsibility to protect the public from exposure to harm, when science has found some evidence of risk. The public looks to its elected leaders to advocate for them, and to provide that protection.

My second point is around that of informed consent: This means that individuals can choose to engage, or not engage in an activity, based on their assessment of the risks and benefits associated with that activity. As individuals, we have the opportunity to weigh risks and benefits, and make informed personal decisions. As parents, we have the absolute right to do this risk-benefit analysis on behalf of our children. This right can be suspended only after due process, by the legal system. School boards do not have this right: they can't take my children's picture, take them on a class trip, or even take them across the street without my consent. They most certainly do not have the right to expose my children to non-ionizing radiation without my consent.

Informed consent is contingent upon a principle known as transparency. Transparency in health care, as in government, means that information is shared freely, enabling people to make their decisions around consent with full knowledge of the risks and benefits involved. Doctors do not perform surgery, prescribe a drug, or do an invasive investigation without fully informing the patient of the potential risks and benefits of the procedure in question. The same applies to researchers: In fact, the Nuremberg Code (1947) dictates, among 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.

All research on humans must be approved by an ethics review board before it can be conducted. I took the liberty of consulting with a medical ethicist... I asked him this question: "Let's say I proposed a study to examine the safety Wi-Fi. My plan is to install Wi-Fi in a bunch of schools, then observe the children to see what, if any, health effects develop. I plan to do this without informing the parents of the potential risks of this study. Also, I would not obtain any parental consent for the children to participate in this study. In fact, I'm not even planning to tell the children or parents that I am doing this study until after the fact." (This is exactly what our local school board is doing.) I then asked the ethicist: "Would this study pass an ethics review?" His response was "Absolutely not". Allow me to make this point perfectly clear: A governing group of doctors and scientists **WOULD NOT ALLOW** other doctors or scientists to do what our school board is planning to do to its students. To my children.

We are fortunate in Peterborough that all four of our local federal candidates have expressed some level of concern regarding the safety of Wi-Fi in schools. In addition, our Conservative incumbent M.P., Dean Del Mastro, has indicated that he thinks "the school board needs to re-think what it is doing". I am hopeful that whichever candidate is successful in winning the Peterborough riding that she or he will continue to pursue much stricter federal safety standards regarding radiofrequency radiation. I also hope that, at a provincial level, restrictions on the use of Wi-Fi in schools can be enacted, along with policies put in place to ensure transparent, ethical process, and adherence to the precautionary principle on the part of school boards.

These are not the school board's children we are talking about. They are MINE. The school board is quite literally planning to do unauthorized, unethical research – without transparency, without consent, and completely ignoring the precautionary principle – on my children, and on every other child who attends one of its schools. The school board **DOES NOT** have the right to experiment on my children. It **DOES NOT** have the right to make decisions that may affect my children's health, now and in the future. And it **DOES NOT** have the right to decide whether the level of risk associated with prolonged Wi-Fi exposure is acceptable for my children. Only I have that right. And I say "NO".