



**STAKEHOLDER ADVISORY GROUP
ON ELF EMFS (SAGE)**

Record of the

SCIENCE FORUM TASK GROUP MEETING

9 March 2009

MOA, Russell Square, London WC1

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the record of the SAGE Science Forum Task Group (SFTG) held on Monday 9 March at the offices of the Mobile Operators Association, Russell Square, London WC1.

The SFTG was set up by the SAGE Science Forum at its meeting of 29 January 2009 to draft terms of reference for the SF, to assist the facilitators in devising a programme of the work for the SF that would deliver the tasks identified by the SF as its initial objectives and to prepare a list of approximately 10 introductory/background documents.

Attendees

Chantelle Roberts, John Swanson, Graham Philips, Jill Meara, Tony Barker, Roger Coghill, Mike Dolan.

Facilitators: Nigel Westaway, Pete Wilkinson

Objectives & Agenda

It was agreed that, in addition to its primary tasks (see above) the SFTG would need to review issues such as the use of external expertise and potential SF coverage of topics aside from childhood leukaemia. The following agenda was agreed for the meeting:

10.30am Introductions & agenda review
 Reflections on Science SF Meeting, 29 January 2009
 Other updates
 Functions of the SFTG
 Purpose of Science Forum: review, priority issues, CL+
 Work programme
 Agenda for 8 May
 Terms of reference
 Documents - availability, how to use
 Expertise
 Change of name for the group?
 Further SFTG work/actions

1.00pm **Close**

Recording

It was agreed that the minutes would record only agreements arrived at, broad currents of discussion and any outstanding issues. It would not be a verbatim report of the meeting.

UPDATES

The continued lack of a formal government response to SAGE Phase I was noted. A further meeting of relevant ministers is currently being arranged, but with no indication as to when this might take place.

PURPOSE OF THE SCIENCE SF

The SFTG confirmed the purpose of the Science Forum (SF) as set out in the report of the January 09 SF meeting, which states that:

“The aim of the SF would not be to create consensus or act as a decision-making body, but to explore the science around the human health impacts of EMFs and understand why divergent views existed. It would not have the capacity to constitute a formal research review group, although it might well examine some scientific studies in order to understand why they had arrived at different conclusions. It is likely that coverage of the SF would, besides childhood leukaemia, include a wider range of conditions that have been attributed to ELF EMF.

“Whilst it was agreed that the SF should not drive to achieve consensus, where agreements could be reached, they should certainly be valued and recorded.

“Attendance would be open to all SAGE members – and there may be a case for opening it to more widely still, to some non-SAGE members. External expertise (including scientific and regulatory) could be invited as required.”

The SFTG group noted that consensus is not required within the SF. It is neither a decision-making body and nor a formal research review group. However, it will explore the reasons for divergent scientific views, how science is evaluated and how it relates to regulation; in order to meet those objectives, it will need to examine documents.

Treatment of CL+

It was agreed that it would be nearly impossible for the SF to explore divergent views without at least considering CL+; exploration of CL+ had not been ruled out, either by the Main Group or the SF, and was implicit in the agreed objectives. But some SF and SFTG members were concerned about the way in which its inclusion might be interpreted by others, both within and outside the SAGE process. The SFTG agreed that CL+ would be a legitimate issue to explore (as a significant area in which views differ) provided it was made clear that its inclusion did not imply acceptance by SAGE as a whole of any of the scientific claims in respect of possible CL+ health impacts. Nor would its inclusion mean that SAGE would try to come to any conclusions or consensus regarding these.

The relationship between EMFs and CL is widely acknowledged (although there is no consensus regarding a causal link). It was acknowledged that CL+ is a more contentious area, discussion of which would expand on the treatment of CL+ already undertaken within SAGE and recorded in the First Interim Assessment and which would highlight the value of the new SF approach – which is not to determine who is right or wrong but to understand why different scientific reviews come to different conclusions. Attempting to give weight to evidence would be a mistake: the SF's role is to understand the reasons for the different interpretations of the evidence, how these are evaluated and how they influence policy-making.

Mapping the literature

It was suggested that the SF could usefully undertake a ‘mapping exercise’ to plot the evidence considered, the factors given particular weight, and conclusions reached by the various papers, authors or review organisations. This could be done without any attempt to evaluate these. It was suggested that SAGE might have to

accept that the differences of opinion arrived at are philosophical in origin and that it could be more profitable to focus simply on understanding the approaches, methodologies, assessment criteria and review procedures.

Individual opinions

It was suggested that an understanding of why scientific studies reached different conclusions could not be based solely on a literature review. It was pointed out that some SAGE members themselves had in-depth scientific knowledge and experience (including first-hand research) – and yet their views still differed on some of the essentials. Many factors influence the stance individuals take on EMFs and if SAGE were serious about examining the reasons for divergent views, it would need to look at the attitudes and opinions of the review bodies, or even, in the first instance, the attitudes and opinions of individual SAGE members.

It was pointed out that in part at least, SAGE's outputs needed to be of use in terms of policy-making and while the methodological or philosophical dimension might not meet this requirement, an exploration of the reasons behind the different positions taken by SAGE members themselves might be a useful and original perspective. As a low-key way into this territory, it was agreed that it would be appropriate to begin by asking those SF members who wished to do so to make a brief (10 minute?) presentation to explain their position regarding EMFs and health, and how they arrived at it. This would not be a substitute for, but an adjunct to, the work of discussing the science itself and how its various conclusions had been arrived at.

Threads might well emerge from the presentations that could be followed up in more depth later and the process would work best if the focus was on the routes by which participants had reached their positions, rather than the positions themselves. Participants would be discouraged from treating their presentation as an opportunity to 'convert' others to their point of view.

However, concern was expressed by one member of the group that individuals' views are shaped by many non-scientific factors and that this exercise might not shed any light on the reasons why scientific reviews have reached different conclusions, instead making the decision making process seem more arbitrary and less based on differing scientific methodologies.

WORK PROGRAMME

It was not possible to develop a long term work plan for the SF, partly due to lack of time and partly because there were still questions about its purpose. This will need to be revisited, either by the SF itself or by the Main Group. However, it was agreed that the next meeting should contain the following elements:

- Introductory session
- A formal presentation introducing the basic concepts and terminology of scientific method and how science is evaluated (potentially including data collection, control, weighting, selection bias, establishing consistency, criteria for assessing the strength of evidence etc)¹
- A first batch of personal presentations explaining viewpoints and how they were arrived at²
- **Lunch**
- Second batch of personal presentations
- Further discussion of the purpose of the SF to give guidance to the mapping exercise below³

- Mapping of scientific reviews in terms of subject matter and conclusions⁴

(It was also agreed that a later stage it would be helpful to examine how policy is developed from scientific assessments.)

Notes on the proposed agenda:

1. It was noted that scientists use a relatively small number of methodologies but lay people are exposed to many other diverse types of evidence which help to formulate their views and it is these experiences and influences it would be good to draw out. In addition, many members would need to have basic information about the origin and nature of those acting as scientific arbiters in the EMF world. (Examples quoted included the nature of the World Health Organisation & HPA, how their work is reviewed, what is meant by peer review, what is considered to be evidence.) This information should be contained in a 'beginners' guide' to EMF science which we should produce in time for the May meeting as a primer for all SF members.

At this stage, there was sufficient expertise within SAGE for these presentations and that **Chantelle Roberts** and **John Swanson** would prepare a paper setting out the scope of the 'beginners' guide'. (It was suggested that evaluation methods are different in Europe and that the paper should reflect this). The presenters of the paper should be **John Swanson** and **Graham Philips**, since they had the expertise and represented different points on the spectrum of views. The length of time for this task at the SF meeting would be determined later and it was likewise felt that the format for the presentation would emerge as the process advanced.

There was agreement that 'new science evaluation' issues should be captured in the presentation as well as the key reports, books and papers most germane to the EMF debate.

2. It was felt that personal accounts and positions might be very diverse and it would be necessary to draw them together into themes and that it should be the job of the facilitators to identify any emerging patterns. Presentations would probably be limited to 10 minutes, plus 5 minutes for clarifications. It was also noted that presenters could speak either for themselves or for their organisation, but that it would be helpful to know which.
3. It was agreed that, in the afternoon session, SF should be asked how they wished to proceed in further meetings and that this would influence the purpose and form of the mapping exercise.
4. SAGE Phase 1 adopted a way of describing and understanding positions on the science which was divided into two broad views – 'WHO' and 'California'. Are there other views which should now be added? There are thousands of studies but only seven or so major international or UK review bodies and it was felt that these would cover a wide range of views and constitute a good starting point. However, this would need to be checked in a SAGE Main Group meeting, which might add more views or approaches that were worth examining. The Main Group might also need to develop criteria for inclusion/exclusion and for determining significance.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

These would be worked up in draft form by the facilitators and circulated for comment at the next SF meeting.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

A list of the most relevant reports, papers and books together with appropriate web links will be circulated to SF members for reading. It will be up to the individuals as to how much or little time they dedicate to reading what could be lengthy documents but summaries abstracts will generally be available. Primer documents will also be included.

NAME OF THE SCIENCE SF

It was suggested that the group could be called the 'science process forum' as this more accurately reflected what it proposed to do. After some discussion, it was agreed to keep simpler name of SAGE Science Forum.

The meeting ended at 2pm.

GA/NW/25.3.09