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Federal Wi-Fi panel criticized for undisclosed conflict

The Royal Society of Canada will reconsider its decision to appoint a University of Ottawa professor to chair a panel that will assess the safety of radiowave-emitting devices such as cellular phones, following a *CMAJ* investigation that reveals a potential conflict-of-interest.

The society's decision comes after *CMAJ* informed it that Daniel Krewski, who is a professor in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ottawa, Ontario and Director of the R. Samuel McLaughlin Centre, failed to disclose to the society that he had a \$126 000 contract in 2008–2009 from Industry Canada. According to the [Merx public tender document](#), Krewski's contract was to "assist in addressing what the Department believes is opposition often based on misperception and misinformation" with respect to cellphone antennas.

In an interview with *CMAJ*, Krewski confirmed that he held this contract and that he had not specifically disclosed it to the society.

After being informed about the contract and Krewski's admission that he had failed to disclose it, Geoffrey Flynn, who chairs the society's Committee on Expert Panels and its Scientific Advisory Committee, told *CMAJ* he would "take it back to the panels" to reconsider the choice of Krewski as chair.

"I don't think there's anything nefarious in it that he didn't disclose it," Flynn says. "The most positive view is that [Krewski] is so busy he overlooked it."

Flynn declined to provide *CMAJ* with all of the panel members' conflict-of-interest disclosures.

Krewski says he did tell the society that he has consulted for the Canadian government. He notes that the contract with Industry Canada was to offer "advice in how to communicate" the risks associated with cellphone antennas. "The aim was not to reinforce Industry Canada's positions, but to help it communicate complex scientific issues."

The Royal Society convened its panel, [Review of Safety Code 6: Potential Health Risks of Radiofrequency Fields from Wireless Telecommunications Devices](#), in March at the behest of Health Canada, which provided \$100 000 in funding. The eight panel members from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are tasked with assessing whether Health Canada should update its 2009 safety guidelines for human exposure to electromagnetic emissions from wireless devices, which Industry Canada regulates.

The 2009 guidelines, *Safety Code 6: Limits of Human Exposure to Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Energy in the Frequency Range from 3 kHz to 300 GHz*, were designed to govern exposure limits in federal workplaces. But in recent years, according to Health Canada, *Safety Code 6* has been "aligned to provide safety provisions for all members of the public." A previous royal society panel assessed the code in 1999.

In 2009, Health Canada edited the guidelines and removed without explanation a passage acknowledging that “certain members of the general public may be more susceptible to harm from microwave exposure.”

Driven by the explosive popularity of mobile phones and other wireless devices, public concern is growing about the rapid penetration of Wi-Fi into almost every facet of Canadian life, including schoolrooms. These concerns intensified in 2011, when a panel of 30 scientists from 14 countries convened by the International Agency for Research on Cancer concluded that [emissions from them are “possibly carcinogenic.”](#)

With scrutiny of the Health Canada guidelines growing, the society’s choice of experts is triggering controversy. According to Citizens for Safe Technology, an Oakville, Ontario-based group that wants tougher federal safety rules on radiofrequency devices, several other panel members may also have undisclosed conflicts-of-interest.

“Having people who are this conflicted, and who are this vocal on this panel is wrong. It should either be disbanded or many of its members replaced,” says spokesperson Frank Clegg, a former CEO of Microsoft Canada.”

Flynn, at the royal society, acknowledges that some of Clegg’s concerns are valid. “We realized some of these members had previously had close connections to the [radiofrequency] industry,” he says. “I know it may be hard to believe, but it was very difficult to find people with sufficient expertise without apparent or perceived connections to the [radiofrequency] industry.”

Clegg strongly disputes the assertion that independent, impartial experts are unavailable and points to the International Agency for Research on Cancer panel as evidence.

Clegg is especially critical of the society’s choice of Krewski. According to Clegg, the McLaughlin Centre, which Krewski directs, was established with help from a million-dollar grant from the Canadian Wireless and Telecommunications Association — a cellphone industry lobby group. Krewski confirmed that association has also funded some of his research.

Krewski, who also chaired a panel for the Royal Society of Canada that reviewed *Safety Code 6* in 1999, says “strong firewalls” separate him from all industry funders for his research. “We don’t want to get a reputation for being in the pocket of industry,” he says.

Anthony Miller, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health suggests the current society panel lacks epidemiological expertise and choosing Krewski as a panelist is inappropriate in light of his outspoken views. Miller, who edited the International Agency for Research on Cancer report warning of a cancer risk, notes that experts with strong linkages to industry are excluded from that agency’s panels, despite the “distressing” lack of independent researchers in the radiofrequency field.

Almost all research on radiofrequency in Canada is industry supported, says Alex Thomas, director of the Bioelectromagnetics Group and Canadian Institutes for Health Research’s University-Industry Chair in Bioelectromagnetics at the Lawson Health Research Institute. As a consequence, he says, truly independent research purely dedicated to examining safety is rarely done.

Thomas suggests the society publish full details of all its panelists’ funding histories. “This matters a great deal because Health Canada is a supposedly independent

watchdog. If they are going to outsource their responsibilities to [the royal society], it should not diminish accountability and openness.”

Health Canada spokesperson Sara Lauer says “it is important to note that before awarding the contract, Health Canada made sure the Royal Society of Canada had a robust Conflict of Interest Policy in place for the appointment of all panel members.”

At the society, Flynn has invited Citizens for Safe Technology to nominate an individual to serve as a peer reviewer for the panel’s report.

“It is almost inevitable that experts in a field will have expressed conclusions based on existing evidence,” says Flynn. “But these views are not immutable. Scientists are accustomed to assessing new evidence and changing their conclusions as required. I am confident that the existing panel, working with a wide variety of inputs and subject to peer review of its report, will make a fair assessment of *Safety Code 6* and make sensible recommendations for changes.” — Paul Christopher Webster, Toronto, Ont.

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