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Chief Executive  
Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service  
Chief Executive  
Northern Ireland Health Promotion Agency  
Chief Executive  
Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency

Our Ref: PEL(00)9

Date: 25 May 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

## **MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS IN A HOSPITAL ENVIRONMENT**

### **Summary**

The report of the independent expert group on mobile phones, chaired by Sir William Stewart, entitled, "Mobile Phones and Health", was published on 11 May 2000.

One of the report recommendations is that all NHS Trusts should comply with Department of Health guidelines on the use of mobile cellphones in a hospital environment. This guidance was issued to the HPSS in Device Bulletin DB 9702(NI), "Electromagnetic Compatibility of Medical Devices with Mobile Communications", 20 June 1997 and in Safety Action Notice SAN(NI) 97/21, "Mobile Communications: Interference with Medical Devices", 25 June 1997.

### **Action**

**HSS Trusts should review the Trust policy on the use of mobile cellphones and ensure that the recommendations in SAN(NI) 97/21 are in place. This states:**

**Cellphones should always be switched off in the following locations:**

- **Operating theatres and treatment areas where sensitive devices may be in use;**
- **By a bedside when the patient is connected to any electromedical device;**
- **Other designated area where there is a perceived risk.**

**Cellphones should not be left in standby mode in designated areas as these continue to communicate periodically with the base station. It is important that:**

- **Users, patients and visitors are informed of the restrictions;**
- **Restricted areas are clearly signed (specific recommendation in the Stewart Report) ;**
- **Staff are made aware of the possibility of interference from mobile phones affecting medical devices.**

### **Background**

In 1999, the then Minister for Public Health, in recognition of public concerns over mobile phone technology asked the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) to set up an independent expert group to consider the health implications of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters and to carry out an assessment of existing research. The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP), under the chairmanship of Sir William Stewart, was asked to look into all aspects of mobile phone technology, and present its conclusions and recommendations to Government. The Group's work included a number of public meetings, one of which was held in Belfast in February.

The Group's report entitled, "Mobile Phones and Health", was published on Thursday 11 May.

The report makes the general conclusion that, while exposure to radio frequency radiation below guideline levels does not cause adverse health effects to the general population, there is now scientific evidence that there may be biological effects occurring at exposures below these guidelines. For this reason the report recommends a precautionary approach to the handling and management of mobile phone technology and makes a number of recommendations, including:

- action to ensure compliance with health service guidelines on the use of mobile phones in hospitals;
- independent random auditing of emission levels with priority given to base stations near schools and other sensitive areas (*hospitals would be defined as sensitive areas*);
- the strengthening of planning arrangements so that the siting of all new base stations should be subject to the normal planning process and that a template of protocols should be developed to inform the planning process;

In general, the report is a comprehensive and thorough review of the issues. Government is responding immediately to some of its conclusions and recommendations and is taking these forward. The Department is aware that the use of

mobile phones in hospitals and other sites where mobile cellphones could possibly interfere with sensitive equipment and the Northern Ireland Defect & Investigation Centre has already issued relevant guidance. This includes policy advice to HPSS organisations covering restricted areas where mobile phones should not be used and the placing of visible warning signs at the entrances to these areas to indicate that mobile phones should be switched off. HPSS organisations are reminded that the policy advice covered other areas of mobile communication such as emergency radio handsets and security radio handsets. Trust policy should include provision for all forms of mobile communications.

Other issues will require more time for consideration and consultation before further specific advice can be given. Those that relate to the HPSS Estate are:

- planning issues and the scope of any new arrangements;
- issues regarding measurements of emissions from base stations on or near schools and other sensitive areas (hospitals and other healthcare sites).

A copy of SAN(NI) 97/21 is enclosed with this letter for your information. Should you require any further information concerning this letter, please contact;

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Yours faithfully

**S Blayney**  
**Director of Estate Policy**