IARC Monographs - Questions and Answers

Dr Christopher Wild, IARC Director, answers a few questions on the IARC Monographs.

Transcript

What is an IARC Monograph?
A monograph is an evaluation of all the evidence in the published scientific literature available which assesses whether a particular exposure is linked to an increase risk of cancer or not. So it is a synthesis if you like of all scientific information we have available to us, and that evaluation is performed by a group of international experts in that field of research that come together and debate the evidence, summarize it and make their conclusions on the basis of the literature in their discussions.

What is the purpose of IARC Monograph program?
So the value of the IARC Monographs is that they really are core to the mission of the International Agency for Research on Cancer and the reason for that is that they are the first step to cancer prevention. What the Monographs do is evaluate all the evidence that is available worldwide to assess whether a particular exposure is linked to an increase risk of cancer or not and it is only once we have established that link that we can start to justify approaches to reduce exposure and therefore reduce the risk of cancer in relation to that exposure.

How is this evidence assessed by IARC?
The evidence that it is considered by IARC in one of its Monographs is approached by bringing together first of all the world’s leading experts in a particular scientific area to sift through all the available evidence which has been published in the literature. And it is this independent working group not the IARC staff themselves that make that evaluation. The evaluation itself is made on the basis of evidence about the extent of human exposure to the risk factor whether it causes cancer in animals or not, whether there have been cancers observed in exposed people and also an assessment of the mechanisms by which that particular agent or risk factor is working. And it is really the synthesis of all those aspects brought together in an evaluation that allows the monograph working group to draw its conclusions.
Why is the current Monograph on Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields so important?
The reason why this particular monograph on radiofrequency electromagnetic fields is so important is first and foremost just because of the large number of users worldwide that have access now to this technology. Latest estimates are that there are over 5 billion people worldwide that use mobile phones for example, and the users want to know whether there is any risk associated with this behaviour. I was recently asked for example, I have been asked by a young person a very simple question: “is it safe to use my mobile phone?” and it is for this reason that this monograph is so important that the world’s leading experts come together try to evaluate all this evidence and come to a conclusion on that particular question.

Will the Monograph be the last word on the topic?
The monograph currently is evaluating the evidence that’s available at a particular point in time and that’s the process that’s been going at the Agency of the last 8 days. Clearly it will not be the last word on the topic and in fact one of the interesting outcomes of the monograph is that it identifies where there are gaps in the knowledge on a certain research area. I think it’s a value of this process therefore it’s suggest interesting areas of future research that will improve the evidence base which we have in order to make decisions about the usage of mobile phone in the future.