

Lakehead says no way to wireless

University cites both health and security concerns for not installing the popular technology

MARTIN MITTELSTAEDT

From Friday Feb 24 Globe and Mail

The students and professors at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ont., won't have wireless Internet access for their computers any time soon. The institution, citing both health concerns and security reasons, has decided against installing the popular technology.

Lakehead is believed to be the only major educational institution in Canada to have taken such a strong step against the technology.

Wireless allows computer users to hook up to networks or the Internet without having to use cables or telephone lines, making access easier in public spaces and homes.

Lakehead's decision affects 7,400 students, 1,600 professors and other staff at the university in the Northern Ontario city.

The university issued a statement yesterday confirming the action and said its students won't suffer technological deprivation because the institution is already so well wired for Internet access.

The university has "many Internet café locations and formal and informal settings on campus, with hardwired hookups where students can use university computers and enjoy specialized software and secure communications," it said.

Instead of going wireless, Lakehead will continue to rely on what it termed its "comprehensive" fibre-optic network that encompasses the campus for Internet access.

"The university will continue to monitor research on wireless technology on an ongoing basis and, at an appropriate time, re-evaluate the university's current position on this issue," it said.

Eleanor Abaya, a spokeswoman for the university, said the decision was made by Lakehead's president, Dr. Fred Gilbert, who wasn't available for comment.

The ban came out of the blue for an industry official.

"I have never heard of any sort of policy put in place like that by an educational institution," said Marc Choma, a spokesman for the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association, an Ottawa-based industry lobby group.

He said most of the country's universities have wireless networks in place, just like many cafés, businesses and restaurants.

Wireless is considered the latest thing in computing, but it has escaped the controversy surrounding devices that expose their users to electromagnetic energy.

The safety of chronic, long-term exposure to electromagnetic energy, of which radio waves are a part, is a hotly contested scientific subject. Researchers have conducted hundreds of studies assessing the health impacts of this form of energy, studying not only radio waves, but related topics, such as microwaves and the electromagnetic fields around electric wiring.

The research is of great interest because almost everyone in developed countries has some contact with electromagnetic energy at levels never found in nature.

With the profusion of cellphone towers, wireless networks and electricity using electronic devices, exposure levels are rising rapidly across the globe.

But most studies have been unable to prove conclusively that common, everyday exposures are a health hazard. In response, regulatory bodies around the world have usually concluded that there is no reason for public concern.

Canadian regulators said yesterday that using wireless hookups for computers is perfectly safe.

"Health Canada has no scientific reason to consider the use of wireless communications devices . . . dangerous to the health of the Canadian public," the department said yesterday in an e-mailed statement.

However, a small number of studies have linked some types of electromagnetic exposures to childhood leukemia, adult brain cancers and miscarriages, among other effects.

And some researchers believe exposures might also be linked to common and widespread ailments, such as feelings of chronic fatigue, difficulty concentrating, poor sleep quality and headaches.

Health Canada said there are some health risks with wireless devices. They're not related to the technology's use of radio waves, however, but rather to the increased risk of having an accident caused by using cellphones while driving.