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Police radio system led to officer's fatal cancer, family fears

By Nick Britten and Nic Fleming

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The family of a police officer who died of cancer have questioned whether the force's controversial new radio system caused the disease.

Pc Neil Dring, 38, died 10 months after being diagnosed with cancer of the oesophagus. His family said he was a keen sportsman who had always enjoyed excellent health.

However, he began complaining of severe headaches shortly after the Government's £2.9 billion Tetra system was introduced.

Pc Dring, who left a wife and two young children, complained to his superiors that the handset, which emits pulsing radio frequencies, was making him ill.

He told his family that he was "convinced" it caused his cancer.

A second officer, who is 40 and works for the same, force has also been diagnosed with the same cancer and is being treated.

Pc Dring's brother, Ian, said: "Neil was convinced it was the radio that was to blame for the cancer. He had raised the issue with a sergeant and a superintendent and we feel it is our duty to follow this through for his sake.

"No one seems to be sure how safe this Tetra system is. It beggars belief that the system was not tested thoroughly before it was rolled out.

"Neil was only 38, didn't smoke and was a keen triathlete. The thing that really hit me was that

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another officer in the same force has contracted the same cancer in the same place, just beneath where he wore his handset."

The Home Office is equipping the 53 forces in England, Scotland and Wales with the Tetra system - Terrestrial Trunked Radio - at a cost of £2.9 billion by the end of 2005. About 2,500 of the required 3,500 transmitters have been erected and 65,000 officers are using the system in 39 forces.

But the system has provoked strong protests, with claims that the radio signals cause headaches, sickness, disturbed sleep and skin rashes.

About 173 officers in Lancashire complained of health effects they attributed to using the system in questionnaires compiled by the Police Federation.

The Home Office last year announced a £5 million health study including a detailed study of 150 officers and a 15-year monitoring programme involving 100,000 users.

Sir William Stewart, the former chief scientific adviser to the Government, said in a report on mobile phone health concerns that frequencies around 16Hz - close to Tetra's 17.6Hz - should be avoided because previous research suggested they could cause potentially harmful changes in cell biology. However, Prof Colin Blakemore, of Oxford University, has dismissed the health concerns around Tetra.

And a report by the National Radiological Protection Board concluded: "Although areas of uncertainty remain about the biological effects of low level RF radiation . . . current evidence suggests that it is unlikely that the special features of the signals from Tetra mobile terminals and repeaters pose a hazard to health."

Mr Dring, whose brother served with the Leicestershire force as a police motorcyclist, is due to meet members of the force and the police federation next week.

"Neil had no preconditions for this sort of cancer and was outside the age group associated with it," he said. "For the whole of his shift his handset was strapped to his chest, where the tumour was found.

"I have a major concern that the system isn't safe. We have spoken to other officers and they are aware of it and are terrified of it."

Stan Sexton, the health and safety adviser for Leicestershire police, said he was "99 per cent certain" that Pc Dring's death had nothing to do with Tetra.

He said the other officer who had contracted cancer was of senior rank and rarely used Tetra.

Steve Edwards, the chairman of Lancashire Police Federation, said: "There is a lot of concern from officers about the system and we need to find out one way or the other whether it presents a risk to health."

A spokesman for O2 airwave, which operates Tetra, said: "We would like to express our sympathy and regret to Pc Dring's family but we would reinforce that the airwave is there as a public safety measure.

"All the handsets comply with the guidelines and there's no evidence to suggest there are any health concerns."

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