

Wondering about a phone bill to Tuvalu?

BY MARK MCNEIL

Modem scam uses your computer and you get long distance bill

Karen Cumming works in the communications business.

But there is one communication the CH News reporter is certain she did not make.

It was a phone call last month from her Hamilton area home to a place called Tuvalu, an island in the south Pacific.

It turns out Cumming was a victim of so-called modem-hijacking. Somehow, a dialer program slipped into her home computer from the Internet. And the program made the call through her modem, without her knowing.

"I was horrified about this. I had no idea such a thing could happen," she said. She doesn't remember clicking into any pop-up menu, which is the usual way that Internet users unwittingly allow the dialer program to be uploaded onto a computer.

Lucky for her the telephone charge was only \$15.60. And her long distance company, Sprint, has agreed to credit her account.

But lots of other people have been far less fortunate. They've received bills for hundreds of

dollars and in some cases up to \$1,500, says Hamilton lawyer David Thompson, who last week brought forward a class action lawsuit on behalf of customers of Bell long distance who have been victimized by the Internet scam.

The plaintiff, Edith Carriere of Moneriville, Ont., alleges in a statement of claim that Bell knew or should have known since Jan. 1, 2002, that calls to these far away places were part of an Internet scam.

She received telephone bills for more than \$1,000, which Bell eventually reduced to \$400.

"Bell Canada, as the largest telecommunication company in Canada, was uniquely positioned to monitor, become aware of, investigate and take proactive steps to prevent such fraudulent schemes," the statement said. Allegations in a statement of claim have not been proven in court.

Thompson says numerous people have contacted his law office saying they were victims of modem hijacking, also

known as Internet dumping. The victims, came forward because they had heard Thompson was involved in a different class action law suit against Bell Canada.

A spokesperson from Bell Canada said the company would not comment on the class-action suit.

But Nathalie Moreau, Bell's associate director of media relations, said it is the telecommunications company's policy to charge the customer based on the lowest rate on the date of the call.

"We consider that the customer is responsible in these situations," she said.

But as of Aug. 1, Bell will start blocking calls to the six most popular destinations: Sao Tome and Principe, Nauru, Guinea-Bissau, Tuvalu, Tokelau and Cook Islands.

"There is no magical solution," said Moreau. "Typically, what happens in these cases is they will simply move to another location."

Moreau said people need to be Internet savvy to avoid being

victimized. The problem happens to dialup connection users using sites that show a popup message that might ask if the surfer wants to continue viewing the site or download some kind of prize, gift or gimmick.

By clicking the link, your computer downloads a program that alters your Internet dial-up properties and redirects your phone connection to an Internet service provider far away, say in Africa, which leads to expensive long distance charges.

The scam artist makes money at this by striking a deal with the African phone company to receive a percentage of the take. The RCMP and Hamilton Police recommend:

■ Do not download and execute programs from anywhere



David Thompson

and anyone you do not trust.

■ Read all disclaimers and user agreements carefully.

■ Consider purchasing a call controller device which will enable you to disallow all long distance phone calls from your computer (approx. \$70). A free program called ZoneAlarm is also available at www.download.com.

■ Listen for suspicious dialling activity when using your computer. Confirm the phone number in your dialling properties.

■ Install anti-virus software and keep your virus definitions up to date.

■ If you have received a long distance phone bill that you believe was caused by your computer, you can send an e-mail message to info@phonabusters.com, including your name, phone number, address, the amount of your telephone bill, and if possible, the website visited that caused the modification. Phonabusters is currently documenting all such complaints. You can also call the RCMP/OPP anti-fraud call centre at 1-888-495-8501.

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