

Commentary

Hanford "Member of the Public" Speaks Out

In the draft report of the Hanford Thyroid Disease Study (HTDS), the researchers came to the conclusion that there was no "dose response," that is, no increase in the incidence of thyroid disease, thyroid cancer, or parathyroid disease that could be found to correspond directly to the reconstructed ^{131}I doses of cohort members.

The study cohort included a group of people exposed as children to ^{131}I fallout from the Hanford nuclear facility, from the Nevada Test Site, and from global fallout. Because ^{131}I was also released widely throughout the United States and portions of Canada from Manhattan Project test sites in the 1940s and 1950s and from the Nevada Test Site in atomic tests beginning in 1951, the pronouncements of HTDS researchers and the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council (NAS-NRC) committee reviewing HTDS have public health implications far beyond Hanford.

Not found within the pages of the NAS-NRC review is information on the dedication and effort of a number of unpaid members of the public. These citizens were exposed to ^{131}I at Hanford and lobbied for a unique, comprehensive review of both the scientific and communication aspects of HTDS by the NAS-NRC committee. Some of those requesting this extended NAS review had thyroid disease themselves or had lost family members to thyroid cancer.

It is members of the public like these who are sometimes labeled inaccurately by nuclear industry professionals as "emotional, suspicious, convinced that any malignancy developed is the result of radiation." Although some of us exposed to ^{131}I , whether from Hanford, the Nevada Test Site, global fallout, or other former Manhattan Project facilities, may indeed fit these emotionally-laden descriptors, the vast majority of us seek only an honest and fair appraisal of the human toll of these exposures.

My father was a nuclear engineer trained at the University of California at Berkeley and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He served in the Navy and was very patriotic. He truly believed and relied upon the assurances, repeated by plant

operators during monthly Hanford safety meetings, that no one was being exposed to radiation health risks. He and my mother attended these meetings conscientiously during the late 1940s and 1950s. All the while, our community was directly in the pathway of repeated airborne emissions of radioiodine and other radioisotopes released as the byproducts of plutonium production at the Hanford facility.

Shortly before his death from papillary thyroid cancer, which rapidly metastasized throughout his body, my father confessed to me that, if he and my mother had known about these ^{131}I releases, he would have moved his family out of the exposure area immediately. I believe him. My father would never have wished harm upon his family.

As the only surviving member of my ^{131}I -exposed family, I strongly questioned the conclusions of the draft HTDS report, as did other people like me. We are part of the "public" in disbelief of the "no health impact from ^{131}I " conclusion of the HTDS research team. We are the children and families of Manhattan Project scientists, engineers, physicians, health physicists, and other professionals in the nuclear field. I come from a family with no previous history of thyroid or parathyroid disease, other than that which has manifested itself in those of us who lived in the Hanford ^{131}I -exposure zone. My father died of papillary thyroid cancer, and my mother developed hypothyroidism and hyperparathyroidism before her death last year from rapidly metastatic malignant melanoma. I have been diagnosed with severe hypothyroidism. My entire immediate family has had thyroid problems, despite an absence of thyroid disease in our extended family.

Ours are not questions posed by an emotional public that believes every malignancy is caused by radiation. Ours is a very specific inquiry by those who have lived our lives within the nuclear culture, asked in order to understand the truth. The answer that has been provided to our questions is that we cannot determine from the HTDS the true extent and severity of the health consequences of these radioiodine exposures. That is the truth, which the NAS review of HTDS has clarified. For that small comfort, we are most thankful.

—Trisha T. Pritikin, daughter of Hanford workers
Member, Hanford Health Effects Subcommittee