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TMI health studies hit

By Ad Crable

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - A new, critical analysis of more than three-dozen studies into the health effects since the 1979 accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant concludes "it is likely a full accounting of health effects will never be known."

documented, argues researcher Joseph Mangano of the nonprofit Radiation and Public Health Project. His article, "Three Mile Island: Health Study Meltdown," is published in the new edition of the peer-reviewed Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

Mangano criticizes the medical community for fixating on stress-related health effects from the accident and not doing extensive research into cancer rates in residents beyond five miles of the plant, where wind-blown radiation may have settled. Both the Bulletin and the Radiation and Public Health Project have been critical of nuclear power.

"Twenty-five years after the largest accident in the history of the U.S. nuclear power industry, the research completed to date is limited," says Mangano, who has published 20 medical journal articles on radiation health effects.

"Nothing exists in the literature on infant mortality, hypothyroidism in newborns, cancer in young children, or thyroid cancer, even though data for all of these were routinely collected in 1979. "All these conditions are especially sensitive to ionizing radiation. Many prominent journals have remained silent. Why?"

In partial answer to his own question, Mangano asserts that the official position of the federal and Pennsylvania governments that the accident had negligible health effects has had a chilling effect. That's very unfortunate, he says, because the "effects of ionizing radiation may take decades to manifest as the onset of a disease like cancer. So monitoring of disease patterns and dose-response comparisons should continue."

Mangano's own research of public health data shows that death rates of Dauphin and Lebanon county residents who were children in 1979 continue to be well above average to this day. Both areas were downwind of TMI during the accident.

"The degree to which this reflects the latent effects of Three Mile Island should be explored, especially since no risk factors in these two counties are obvious," Mangano says. Evidence surfaced after the accident that radiation releases traveled long distances. Both Albany, N.Y., and Portland, Maine, documented elevated radioactivity levels several days after the accident, according to Mangano.

"But these findings were largely ignored by health officials, and potential health effects in downwind areas further than 10 miles from the plant never examined."

Furthermore, Mangano maintains his examination of health data shows that in the two years after the accident, the infant death rate rose in 13 of the 19 counties downwind from the plant. Lancaster was not one of the counties identified as being down wind during the accident.

He also rues that only five articles examining the link between radiation exposure and cancer near TMI have made it to medical journals. Four of those found no link between the accident and cancers near the plant.

Effects of radiation may take decades to show up and scientists' understanding of the health effects from low-dose exposure continues to change, Mangano writes.

The fact that there were no accurate readings of radiation levels outside the plant and that TMI health research has proved controversial should not deter scientists from seeking answer to unanswered TMI questions, Mangano asserts.

But the truth could and should be documented, argues researcher Joseph Mangano of the nonprofit Radiation and Public Health Project.

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“If the public’s health is to be protected to the greatest degree possible, it is imperative we learn the full lessons of an event like Three Mile Island,” he said.

Eric Epstein, head of the local Three Mile Island Alert safe-energy group, praised the study, saying it “clearly demonstrates that further studies on the health effects on the accident are warranted.”

At a press conference today, Epstein said he would ask the state Health Department to reopen its examination of adverse health effects from the accident.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, published by the Educational Foundation for Nuclear Science, was founded in 1945 by scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project. Based at the University of Chicago, it warns of the dangers of nuclear weapons.

The New York-based Radiation and Public Health Project was established by scientists and physicians to focus on the relationships between low-level nuclear radiation and public health.

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