

Nuclear Workers – Statement to the House

The Rt. Hon. Alistair Darling MP, Former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

House of Commons, 18 April 2007

With your permission Mr Speaker, I should like to make a short statement on the examination of tissue taken from some individuals who had worked in the nuclear industry and who died between November 1962 and August 1991.

Mr Speaker having regard to the feelings of the families of those concerned and because it is in the public interest, I want to provide the House with the information available from BNFL who now operate the Sellafield site where these examinations were carried out. I shall then set out how I intend to proceed with this matter.

Most employees worked at Sellafield but one individual worked at the Capenhurst nuclear site in Cheshire, and had transferred from Sellafield.

In addition, there is data but not medical records at Sellafield relating to an employee at the Springfields nuclear site in Lancashire and 6 at Aldermaston.

BNFL which holds the relevant medical records tell me that to date they have been able to identify 65 cases in which tissue was taken from individuals which was then analysed for the radionuclide content of organs.

It is important to tell the House the limited nature of the records that are held by BNFL.

These are medical records which show what analysis was done on organs removed following post mortem examination.

Because they are medical records which dealt with the analysis carried out at Sellafield they do not provide an audit trail which would show in every case who asked for such an examination under what authority and for what purpose. Nor do they disclose whether or not the appropriate consent from next of kind was received.

Some records have more information than others, but at this stage it is simply not clear what procedures were followed in every case.

From the information I have I can tell the House that 23 such requests for further examination and analysis were made following a coroner's inquest. A further 23 requests appear to follow a coroner's post mortem. 3 requests were made associated with legal proceedings and there was 1 request made associated with legal proceedings and there was 1 request made by an individual prior to death.

It is assumed, therefore, that these requests were made to help establish the cause of death in the normal way. In many cases this would be part of the coroner's inquiry. But we cannot be sure of that because there is not an audit trail to establish that as a fact.

Mr Speaker there was a further single request made following a biopsy of a living individual.

In respect of a further 4 causes I understand that the records do not record by what mechanism the request for the analysis was made.

It is clearly important to establish why these requests were made and for what purpose.

It is also clear that the data obtained from these examinations has been used in other studies which were subsequently published.

One of the questions that arise is therefore whether or not it was appropriate to use the data gathered for this purpose.

Mr Speaker it follows from what I said that the records held by BNFL do not disclose whether or not the next of kin knew of these examinations and analysis. That is something that needs to be established.

Most cases appeared to come following a coroner's request. It is possible therefore that in some cases there was such knowledge. But it is not at all clear that even if they had known about the analysis they would have been aware that data gathered was then used as part of wider research studies. However, it will be necessary to examine the coroner's records to find out what the position was.

Mr Speaker, BNFL tell me that they believe that the tissue would have been destroyed. Certainly, BNFL tell me that no such tissue exists today. However, they are not certain at this stage what procedures were followed.

The House will appreciate that some of these cases go back 45 years. It is simply not possible therefore today to be sure whether procedures were carried out properly. The information held by BNFL as I have said necessarily limited and a full investigation is therefore necessary.

I believe that it necessary to establish why these examinations were carried out and whether or not the next of kin were informed and consented to this analysis.

It is also necessary to establish whether or not these examinations were carried out following the correct and proper procedures and whether the data obtained was used appropriately and with the necessary consents.

The families and the public will want to know the answers to all these questions.

I have therefore asked Michael Redfern QC, who conducted the 'Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry at Alder Hey' to carry out an independent investigation into this matter. I have asked him to establish the facts, and to report to me. This report will be published. I will inform the House of the full terms of reference shortly.

Mr Speaker this is clearly a difficult situation covering events that took place up to 45 years ago. Nonetheless we owe it to the families as well as to the general public to find out what happened and why.

Comment:

We are aware that this is a very sensitive issue. However, the questions are highly important:

- ◆ *How did the nuclear industry managers get the samples?*
- ◆ *How do you **legally** come by tissue and organs for examination?*
- ◆ *Who determined the source of any samples and what criteria were used?*
- ◆ *What level of collusion was required, and which individuals consented?*
- ◆ *Was there any NHS involvement, if so, at what level?*
- ◆ *What was the aim of any experiment/examination?*
- ◆ *What conclusions were arrived at following any examination of materials or organs?*
- ◆ *To what extent were relatives made aware of the true situation?*

The allegations seem to span everyone who comes into contact with dead bodies, including hospital clinicians, pathologists and coroners. Scary stuff. Hopefully these professionals will be shown to be innocent.

The Redfern Inquiry was originally scheduled to be published late in 2009; it is now October, 2010, and no publication date has yet been announced.