

Humans in secret radioactive tests

Rob Edwards, Environment Editor

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Official documents reveal volunteers drank and inhaled infected material to assess contamination risks.

Dozens of people drank, inhaled or were injected with radioactivity as part of a series of secret experiments carried out by the nuclear industry in the 1960s, according to official documents passed to the Sunday Herald.

Tests exposing humans to radioactive caesium, iodine, strontium and uranium were conducted despite doubts about their legal and ethical implications. One proposal even envisaged injecting plutonium into elderly people to help assess contamination risks.

The new evidence could form part of the government inquiry launched last week into the industry's shady past. The trade and industry secretary, Alistair Darling, appointed Michael Redfern QC to investigate concerns that body tissue from dead nuclear workers had been removed for tests without the consent of relatives. Tissue from organs and bones were taken from 65 deceased workers at Sellafield in Cumbria and other nuclear plants between 1962 and 1991. They were sampled for radioactive contamination to help improve understanding of the health risks.

Now documents from the National Archives in London have shed new light on other scandals involving the nuclear industry. A memo from the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) in August 1965 summarised a series of "experiments involving exposure of volunteers to radiation". It said 10 volunteers from Harwell in Oxfordshire drank a liquid containing caesium-132 and caesium-134 in November 1962.

Two volunteers from Sellafield, then known as Windscale, also ingested some strontium 90 to investigate "uptake by the gut".

A further 18 volunteers at Harwell in 1964 breathed in a vapour of methyl iodide-132 to test its retention in the thyroid gland. If anyone became ill as a result,

the memo said, they would be able to sue for damages, though the risk was dismissed as "negligible".

A letter from May 1968 mentioned moral and practical concerns raised over two uranium tests planned for the Springfield nuclear plant near Preston.

Another memo from 1962 referred to highly controversial US experiments in which elderly and sick hospital patients were injected with plutonium. It suggested carrying out a similar experiment in the UK, mentioning old people as potential candidates.

The nuclear researcher and consultant who unearthed the documents, Dr David Lowry, has offered to submit his evidence to the Redfern inquiry. "The revelations put a large question mark against official reassurances given by the nuclear industry to successive public inquiries that radiation protection measures were adequate," he said.

Lowry, co-author of a forthcoming book on nuclear power, is particularly concerned about the way he alleges the UKAEA planned to spin the human experiments. "The nuclear industry must learn that the public demands the whole truth not half-truths when it comes to public health and safety," he said.

One memo from January 1963 recommended against announcing experiments before they began. Instead it suggested providing a brief for public relations staff "for use only if the experiments become public knowledge".

An earlier meeting in 1962 was keen to keep plans to do whole body monitoring for radiation under wraps. "The least possible publicity should be given to the process of volunteering," the meeting concluded.

Further evidence of tissue sampling for radioactive contamination comes from a nuclear historian at the University of Manchester, Dr Emm Barnes. She pointed out that a variety of studies were discussed at a meeting at the Department of Health in October 1984.

The draft minutes of the meeting, marked "in confidence", quoted a scientist from the government's then National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). "The NRPB had been collecting and analysing human tissue samples from Cumbria and several other parts of the country for sometime," he said.

"Samples of tissue from lungs, liver and bone were collected and analysed for plutonium and other radioactive wastes," the report said. "Some, but not all, samples were obtained from coroners' post-mortems."

Scientists had also "obtained tissue samples from children dying in road accidents, and were trying to obtain foetal tissues and placentae".

The meeting also discussed the "ethical problems" of feeding radioactively contaminated whelks from

near Sellafield to children. According to Dr Barnes, scientists proposed to use stillborn babies and aborted fetuses in some tests, without informing parents of the results.

The UKAEA is investigating whether any tissue from workers who had died at the Dounreay nuclear plant in the north of Scotland had been involved in the experiments. It is expecting to make a statement next week, and submit evidence to the Redfern inquiry.

A UKAEA spokesman also confirmed that radiological exposure experiments had taken place, but stressed that all the volunteers were members of staff who had given their informed consent. The proper medical protocols of the time had been followed, and exposures were low.

The need to develop nuclear power and nuclear weapons were "adequate justification" for exposing workers, one 1963 memo said.

"The proposal to expose volunteers to radiation to improve radiobiological knowledge is no more than a simple extension of the same principle."

Longest FOI battle ends in defeat over cancer data

Rob Edwards, Environment Editor

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Scotland's first, longest and most disputed Freedom of Information case has ended up keeping vital cancer statistics secret.

After two investigations by the Scottish information commissioner, Kevin Dunion, plus appeals to the Court of Session in Edinburgh and the House of Lords in London, numbers that might shed light on the links between children's blood cancer and radioactive pollution have been kept under wraps. The Scottish Green Party, which made the original request, is frustrated and annoyed. The Scottish Health Service, which fought to keep the information confidential, sounds relieved.

Back at the start of 2005, Michael Collie, a researcher for the then Green MSP, Chris Ballance, asked the Scottish Health Service for the annual incidence of childhood leukaemia in every census ward in Dumfries and Galloway from 1990 to 2003. They wanted to test widespread suspicions that the debilitating and potentially fatal cancer could be caused by radioactive contamination. Plutonium from the Sellafield nuclear plant in Cumbria washes up on the Solway coast, and has been detected around the shoreline.

The health service, however, refused to release the information on the grounds that the small numbers of cases in particular areas might enable individual patients still alive to be identified. So Collie lodged Scotland's first Freedom of Information appeal with Mr Dunion's office in St. Andrews on 27 January 2005.

After a six-month investigation, Mr Dunion concluded that the information could be released in a way that would not identify individuals. But the health service appealed to the Court of Session. The Scottish court upheld Mr Dunion's findings, but the health service then appealed again to the House of Lords in England. In July 2008, five law lords concluded that Mr Dunion was wrong in law, and ordered him to rethink his decision. They argued that the form in which the information would be released amounted to sensitive personal data, that should be kept confidential under the 1998 Data Protection Act.

As a result Mr Dunion, below, has conducted a second investigation, the results of which were sent to those involved last week. This time he agreed with the House of Lords, and ruled that the information as requested should not be released. He did, however, order the health service to provide aggregated statistics for the whole Dumfries and Galloway Health Board area. But they will not show the very local effects that are suspected. "I regret that it has taken so long to finalise this decision, particularly when your application was the first to be made," wrote Mr Dunion to Mr Collie. "I appreciate how frustrating the whole process must have been for you."

The saga had helped resolve some issues over the form in which information had to be provided, but there were still problems. "Confusion over the definition of personal data is likely to remain for some time," said Mr Dunion. "I don't think there is anything at all for us in this," commented former MSP Mr Ballance. "We wanted to test the hypothesis that childhood leukaemia rates are higher by the coast than inland, because of radiation from Sellafield blown in on sea spray. "An aggregated set of statistics for the area will tell us nothing except that they are about in line with national statistics. I think we know that already."

Mr Ballance argued that local communities had a right to their own health statistics. "The small numbers at issue here are a problem, but I don't accept that there is no better way round it," he stated.

NHS National Services Scotland's medical director, Dr Marion Bain, accepted this had been a difficult request. "We are fully supportive of the fundamental principles underpinning Freedom of Information," she said. "At the same time, we have a clear duty to respect and preserve patients' right to confidentiality." The information in the form now requested by Mr Dunion would be released. "We will continue to work closely with the information commissioner to make as much information available as possible where this is consistent with protecting patient privacy," Dr Bain added.

Spanish energy giant Iberdrola boosts Scottish-based engineering workforce

Tim Sharp

22 Jun 2010

Scottishpower owner Iberdrola has taken a major step in establishing a UK-based engineering business by incorporating 96 members of the ScottishPower energy networks team into the operation.

The new Iberdrola Engineering and Construction UK division will be located in Bellshill, North Lanarkshire.

The business has been operating on a limited basis with around 30 employees since 2009 and plans are in place to increase the workforce to 150 by the end of this year.

As revealed by The Herald in February, ultimately it is expected to be staffed by as many as 250 highly trained specialist engineers.

Iberdrola is keen to develop the business to carry out all contracted work on high-voltage power lines and substations across ScottishPower's electricity networks in southern

Scotland, Merseyside and North Wales.

The unit will work on the design of high voltage network projects, most notably on planned offshore wind farms.

Its remit will include the carbon capture project being pursued at Longannet and a new gas-powered plant at Cockenzie near Edinburgh.

It will also have a role in planning a new nuclear facility at Sellafield, Cumbria.

Peter Jones, regional director of Iberdrola Engineering and Construction UK, said: "There are major construction opportunities in the UK energy sector, and we hope that the business will continue to expand in the coming years."

Iberdrola has pledged to invest £4 billion in the UK over the next three years.

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/business/corporate-sme/spanish-energy-giant-iberdrola-boosts-scottish-based-engineering-workforce-1.1036408>
