

Sunday Herald 4th July 2004

<http://www.sundayherald.com/43149>

Radiation risk ‘underplayed’ to avoid compensation payouts

By **Rob Edwards**

Governments have deliberately downplayed the dangers of radiation so that they can avoid paying compensation to veterans of nuclear tests and carry on deploying depleted uranium (DU) weapons.

Dr Keith Baverstock, who was the World Health Organisation’s senior radiation adviser in Europe, says that science has been “perverted for political ends” by government agencies which should be protecting public health.

“Politics, aided and abetted by some in the scientific community, has poisoned the well which sustains democratic decision-making,” he told a conference on low-level radiation in Edinburgh yesterday.

Baverstock, now advising the UK government as a member of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management, delivered a fierce attack on government scientists. He accused the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) of “misusing” science in their studies of nuclear test veterans.

Over 21,000 members of the British armed services watched 46 nuclear tests in Australia and the Pacific between 1952 and 1962. Many have since become ill, and campaigned for compensation from the Ministry of Defence.

The MoD has rejected their claims on the grounds that there was no proof that radiation from the tests made them sick. The ministry is backed by three major studies carried out by the NRPB over the past 20 years, most recently in 2002.

Yesterday, Baverstock alleged that there was a “serious flaw” in the NRPB’s methodology because as many as 15% of the veterans could be missing from the studies. This could conceal an excess in cancer deaths, he said.

He pointed out that there was a lack of information on how much radiation people had been exposed to. A statistical excess of leukaemia among the veterans had also been dismissed as a “chance” finding.

“The conclusion is that the NRPB survey is deficient,” he said. “Further work needs to be done. It is sad that the NRPB, which should be an independent body, was complicit .”

The NRPB, based at Didcot in Oxfordshire, strongly denied the accusation. “We used standard methods for finding deaths and cases of cancer. These have been used in hundreds of studies,” said Gerry Kendal, head of population exposure at the NRPB.

He maintained that to have introduced additional cases in an ad hoc way would have produced “biased” results. The independent committee that oversaw the research was happy with the approach that was taken, he added.

The 2002 NRPB study was originally challenged by Sue Roff, a senior research fellow at Dundee University Medical School. She contended that up to 30% of multiple myeloma cancer cases among veterans had been overlooked by the NRPB.

“I’m not sure if this was a political or a scientific decision by the NRPB. But it was certainly more of a comfort to the MoD than to veterans,” she said.

Baverstock also accused the World Health Organisation of having “suppressed” a report he wrote in 2001 highlighting the dangers of DU in Iraq. The Sunday Herald revealed in February that the report predicted that DU from US and UK weapons would increase cancer rates among adults and children in the country.

By downplaying the risks from radiation, government agencies had undermined public trust in science and technology, he concluded. This was going to make it much more difficult to find an acceptable solution to the problem of how to dispose of radioactive waste from nuclear power stations.

04 July 2004