



## **Paducah -- Never Again**

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Joe Harding worked at the Department of Energy's Paducah, Ky., uranium enrichment plant and died in 1980 of cancer at age 58. He was one of a half-million people who processed nuclear and other materials and turned them into the 70,000 nuclear warheads that the United States produced during the Cold War. He worked in a highly polluted environment and died with uranium in his bones. Yet, the DOE and its contractor Union Carbide denied that radiation might have caused his illness. His case is unusual only in that he wrote a diary and spoke out freely before he died, so that his plight is now well known, thanks to a recent [Washington Post story \[front page, Aug. 8\]](#).

The U.S. government practice of denying overexposure to radiation to workers without proper scientific analysis of available data has resulted in gross injustices for large numbers of people. For instance, workers at DOE's Fernald, Ohio, plant, where uranium was fashioned into metal targets and fuel elements for reactors, were told for years that they were not overexposed and that the plant was safe.

But a 1994 study done by my colleagues who analyzed the raw data files in the context of a class-action lawsuit filed by plant workers showed that during the 1950s and early '60s, more than half the workers were overexposed in every year but one. In 1955, 90 percent of the workers were overexposed by then-prevailing standards. The research also showed that the data were so sparse that it was impossible to reliably calculate individual exposures — only group radiation doses could be estimated with confidence.

The DOE settled the lawsuit on behalf of the contractor for \$15 million and medical monitoring, but admitted no wrongdoing. The government had previously settled a similar suit by the plant's neighbors about off-site contamination for \$78 million.

In 1997 the DOE admitted that, until 1989, it had never calculated the radiation doses to workers resulting from inhalation or ingestion of uranium, plutonium and other radioactive materials present at any of its nuclear weapons plants, even though the raw data to do so were often available. These data sat un-analyzed in internal files. Moreover, the allegations of the Paducah health physicists reported by *The Washington Post* indicate that, despite DOE claims to the contrary, the problems leading to flawed dose records may have continued past 1989.

The poor and incomplete state of the dose records, frequently terrible working conditions (uranium air contamination at Fernald, for instance, was often tens or hundreds of times above maximum allowable limits) and the lack of any records for exposures to many toxic non-radioactive materials, point to one stark conclusion. The DOE and its contractors have often made scientifically incorrect and baseless denials of harm.

Given that reality, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson's statement that the DOE will not be a "Department of Excuses" and will actually help workers who have been harmed is laudable but highly inadequate. Many nuclear weapons workers are sick from causes that are not readily identifiable partly because poor and grossly incomplete records mean that it is often impossible for them to prove causation.



All surviving nuclear weapons complex workers should be provided with medical monitoring. In cases where medical benefits are needed, there should be a presumption of causation for a variety of ailments. Where regulations were egregiously violated, contractors should be made to pay. And there should be generous compensation for surviving family members in cases such as Joe Harding's.

Department-wide investigations in the wake of the Paducah scandal should attempt to determine whether there has been fraud in maintenance of data records — for instance, were any of the dose data fabricated? Such inquiries should also be directed toward the reforms that will prevent a recurrence of the lamentable conditions that workers and their families have suffered for decades.

The signs are not reassuring. Current proposals for DOE reorganization are headed in the wrong direction. Past failures arose not from a lack of legal mandate — the DOE and its contractors were and are required to protect health and the environment. The central problem has been DOE self-regulation and secrecy in health and environmental matters.

Despite this record, the Los Alamos National Laboratory spy scandal has led to reorganization proposals that would entrench self-regulation and downgrade the already weak position of DOE's internal environment, safety and health division. This is a prescription for a tragic repetition of past abuses. Whatever security reorganization results from the spy scandal, it is imperative that the worker health, safety and environmental protection aspects of DOE's nuclear weapons work be externally regulated. Three agencies would be involved: the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency. Such regulation has been much studied and debated; it is time to put it firmly into place.

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For more information on worker radiation exposure, see IEER's newsletter, *Science for Democratic Action*: [Vol. 5 No. 3](#), [Vol. 6 No. 2](#), and [Vol. 7 No. 3](#)