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Prisoners X-Rayed in Sterility Test

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The Atomic Energy Commission in the 1960s beamed X-rays into the testicles of 131 state prisoners in Oregon and Washington to learn whether heavy radiation made them sterile, the Energy Research and Development Administration confirmed yesterday.

The prisoners, ERDA said, gave written consent to the experiments and underwent vasectomies (permanent sterilization) after the ra-

diation had damaged their reproductive systems to the point the men could have fathered deformed children.

ERDA—which last year took over the research functions of the now defunct AEC—said there is no evidence that the radiation provoked cancer in any of the prisoners, a risk known and weighed at the time. But the federal government is not certain because no comprehensive follow-up check of the prisoners has been made.

An ERDA spokesman said yesterday that the agency wants to do a follow-up study but that state authorities and some of the prisoners are reluctant to cooperate because of possible embarrassment.

The radiation made some of the prisoners sterile for as long as five years, but ERDA said medical examinations and studies of tissue samples showed they all could have recovered their fertility.

An ERDA spokesman

stressed that the federal government is now far more sensitive to objections to such human experimentation and would not conduct the same kind of tests.

Dr. James L. Liverman, assistant administrator for environment and safety at ERDA, said that "it is difficult to imagine circumstances under which ERDA's need for information would be so compelling as to warrant experiments involving the irradiation of humans

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for the sole or primary purpose of studying effects."

The subjects chosen for the radiation experiment conducted between 1963 and 1971 were all serving life sentences and were between 23 and 52 years old. Catholics were excluded from the experiment, ERDA said—presumably because of the church's objections to mechanical birth control.

The X-ray dosages ranged from 8 to 600 rads—the higher end of that range being an extremely heavy dose.

A rad is a measure of radiation absorbed by the body. The AEC considered 5 rads a permissible exposure

level for workers in the nuclear industry. This was for the whole body, not a specific small area.

ERDA spokesmen—who stressed the experiments preceded the establishment of their new agency—said 67 prisoners in the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem and 64 prisoners in the Washington State Prison in Walla Walla agreed to the X-ray experiments.

The agency said it did not know how many of the prisoners who were radiated have returned to civilian life, but the Willamette Week newspaper in Oregon said it had learned that 51 of the 67 prisoners in that state are now out of prison.

Since all the prisoners

subjected to heavy X-ray doses had vasectomies afterward there is no way to know how the radiation would have affected offspring.

However, the AEC continued to study the reproductive organs during the experiment—including taking tissue samples—and learned that all the men recovered their reproductive capacity.

The wives of the prisoners as well as the men themselves agreed to the experiments in the belief it would contribute to science, ERDA said. No large amounts of money were paid to the prisoners for their cooperation, ERDA said, but some of them apparently received minor compensation.

The AEC paid \$1,064,000 to the Pacific Northwest Research Foundation for the Oregon experiments and \$505,000 to a team headed by Dr. C. Alvin Paulsen of the School of Medicine at the University of Washington for the Washington radiation experiments, ERDA said. Paulsen is now on the U. S. Public Health Service in Seattle.

ERDA has retained Mavis J. Rowley who assisted in the Oregon tests and now is on the staff of the Swedish Hospital Medical Center in Seattle, to keep the records of the radiated prisoners.

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