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Hanford conducted human experiments

Washington state prisoners took part in radiation testing in past 25 years

By Lonnie Rosenwald
Staff writer

RICHLAND — A series of radiation experiments on humans — including one performed on testicles of Washington prison inmates — was overseen by Hanford nuclear officials in the past 25 years, according to documents released Monday.

The U.S. Department of Energy made the documents available after a request from a member of a national panel studying health ef-

fects of Hanford Nuclear Reservation activities.

In one experiment performed from 1963-1973, 64 inmates at the Washington State Penitentiary volunteered to have their testicles X-rayed. They later underwent vasectomies to prevent them from conceiving damaged children.

Tests also were conducted on 67 prisoners at the Oregon State Prison between August 1963 and May 1971.

In a 1958 test, a woman in an unidentified city was given a dose of

radioactive Carbon-14 during her 10th week of pregnancy. According to the documents, she was given an abortion six days later because the fetus had sickle-cell anemia.

Eight people were paid to submit to radiation doses at the University of Washington Hospital in 1965 and then have their excretions measured for signs of radioactive discharge, the documents say.

None of the test participants was identified.

The tests were supervised by Hanford under the jurisdiction of the DOE or its predecessor, the Atomic Energy Commission.

"We're not talking about human experimentation the way I think some people would characterize it

during the war in Nazi Germany or something like that," said Hanford operations manager Michael Lawrence.

"These were all tests done to determine the effects of radiation and people were informed what was going on."

The purpose apparently was to develop safety standards for nuclear workers and to help find cures for cancer.

Asked if the tests were a good idea, Lawrence replied, "You'd have to ask the medical community that."

Dr. Wayne Attwood of Spokane, local president of Physicians for Social Responsibility, compared the experiments to those conducted

by the Nazis.

"This is the type of thing we saw and condemned under Hitler," Attwood said. "It rings of that type of activity in my mind. I would view this as a very serious matter."

Attwood said experiments have been conducted before on prisoners to find cures for diseases, but radiation is more dangerous because of its possible long-term effects.

"When you're using an unknown agent, such as radiation, it can be very dangerous," he said. "This has been done in the past, but it has been condemned by the medical community."

"The whole concept of human experimentation has been viewed with concern, and considered unac-

ceptable. I think it's pretty devastating."

Lawrence, however, characterized human radiation studies as "much more widespread than perhaps you understand."

He acknowledged such human tests, done on site and elsewhere, no longer are done at DOE. He said he didn't know why they were stopped.

Lawrence said Hanford "provided the overall management and oversight" for the tests, but "they were tests requested by Washington (D.C.)."

Details of the experiments were provided to Congress in 1984, he added.

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Experiments

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In a September 1984 letter to Rep. Richard Ottinger, D-N.Y., U.S. Energy Secretary Donald Hodel wrote, "there was a general practice to inform participants in human volunteer studies with respect to the purpose of the experiment and the potential hazards involved."

The documents provide only scant details of the tests.

In the prison experiment, inmates had their testicles irradiated, and then were examined for up to six years for changes in their sperm and hormones.

They signed consent forms before the study began, according to the report.

"Only individuals desiring vasectomy were accepted for the study, but in several instances the volunteers changed their mind and did not desire a vasectomy at the conclusion of the study," it says.

"Subjects were prison inmates only, thus eliminating the possibility of conception during the study."

The report says all the inmates fully recovered within 501 days.

Tim Conner of the Hanford Education Action League said, "The testing has a touch of the barbaric about it..."

"DOE has shown a rather callous disregard for human beings and this is another example of it," said Conner, who had not heard of the experiments previously.

In another study, three women — including one who was 10 weeks pregnant — were given Carbon-14 to measure the effect on fetal and maternal tissue.

The documents don't say where the women lived. The project was conducted by several research groups, including Pacific Northwest Laboratory at Hanford and the University of Washington.

Information on the tests was requested by Robert Alvarez, a member of the Hanford Health Effects Study Panel, which began a week of public hearings and discussions in Richland Monday.

The panel was appointed by the national Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, which was asked by Washington to study possible health

effects of Hanford activities on nearby residents.

Panelist Alvarez also is a member of the Environmental Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental watchdog group.

On another matter, state officials told the panel that infants in the Tri-Cities probably received massive doses of radiation in their thyroids as a result of Hanford releases in 1945.

A study by the Department of Social and Health Services estimated doses of Iodine-131 to a baby living in Pasco were as high as 2,295 rems.

"If that happened today, we'd call out the National Guard," Allen Conklin of the Office of Radiation Protection told reporters.

The study said Spokane infants could have received doses of up to 256 rems.

Conklin said he couldn't estimate the effect of such doses, but most people receive no thyroid radiation today.

The DOE allows its workers to receive no more than 100 millirems, or one-10th of a rem, of radiation over a year.

Radiation gets to the thyroid after being ingested in milk from cows that graze on radiation-contaminated grass.

The CDC panel is to recommend Friday whether further health studies should be conducted.

Without another full-scale study, Conklin said, "there would be no way to tell" health effects.

Lawrence, however, questioned the accuracy of the dose estimates because little accurate environmental data exists from 1945.

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