

INTERACTIONS OF EXPERTS AND THE PUBLIC

Patrick Young

Let me begin with an unpleasant reality for both sides. When it comes to radiation, there are many people who do not trust or believe you. They also do not trust me and my colleagues. They do not believe what we say, write, or broadcast. The people are afraid, some would say irrationally, and perhaps in many cases this is true. However, radiation, by its nature, holds a special place in man's closet of fears. It is, of course, associated with nuclear weapons, and many of us have grown up watching the film of the atomic bomb tests and the mushroom-shaped cloud coming off the water with ships disappearing in it. Nuclear weapons bring to mind Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the dying sheep of Utah, and the alleged incidence of increased cancer.

People who do not work with radiation and are not experts in it are aware that it is there. It is silent, you cannot see it, cannot taste it, cannot smell it. It is what David Salisbury, who used to work for the Christian Science Monitor, described as that "mysterious form of castration."¹ People do not really understand the consequences and risks of radiation exposure but they tend to know that radiation can kill. They know very little about what levels are lethal.

Ronald Doctor, who is a psychologist at California State University, Northridge, related some of his observations to me (personal communication). He has watched as people driving through southern California near a nuclear power plant will roll up their windows before they pass the plant and roll them down afterwards. This is not a very rational or trusting thing to do. At Three Mile Island, no mass evacuation was ordered, although the governor asked that pregnant women and also children under age 5, living within a five-mile area, leave. And yet 144,000 people in the vicinity left for the better part of a week.¹ This mass exodus occurred without many people being aware it was going on.

After the Chernobyl explosion, we in this country were assured that there was no danger of radiation fallout. Yet in California, there were reports of hoarding of milk. And the Environmental Protection Agency received telephone calls from people wanting to know if they should take potassium iodide² and if they should keep their children indoors. Thus, when a radiation emergency occurs, whether it is as significant as the one at Three Mile Island or a spill on the highway, media people will respond. I will leave it to you to figure out what a radiation emergency without the media would be like.

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