High radiation exposure rates from the Three Mile Island nuclear accident were hidden from public

A court order gagged medical findings while many radiation monitors were inoperable

TAKOMA PARK, MD — Residents around the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant that suffered a partial meltdown on March 28, 1979, were exposed to much more radiation from the nuclear disaster than was claimed by officials, says a spokesperson from Beyond Nuclear, a national anti-nuclear and environmental organization.

After the Three Mile Island reactor core melted and radioactivity was released to the surrounding population, researchers were not allowed to investigate health impacts of higher doses because the TMI Public Health Fund, established to pay for public health research related to the disaster, was under a research gag order issued by a court.

"Because of this court order, actual doses and health impacts were kept from the public for years, leading to the false impression that "no one died" at Three Mile Island, and "that health impacts were minimal and very little radiation got out," said Cindy Folkers, radiation and health specialist at Beyond Nuclear.

"Research into the true health impacts at Three Mile Island was compromised by a single judge, Sylvia Rambo, who established the parameters for any researcher who wanted to conduct a study using money from this Fund," Folkers said.

The conditions were:

1. Those studying the health impact of Three Mile Island radiation emissions were prohibited from assessing "worst case estimates" of radiation releases unless such estimates would lead to a conclusion of insignificant amount of harm—that being "less than 0.01 health effects".
2. If a researcher wanted to claim more harm or investigate a worst-case scenario, an expert selected by nuclear industry insurers would have to "concur on the nature and scope of the [dosimetry] projects."

Compounding the problem, claims that very little radiation was released during the accident cannot be substantiated because, according to the Kemeny Commission, "An exceptional percentage (well over half) of health physics and monitoring instruments were not functional at the time of the accident."

"Without properly functioning monitoring equipment, dose reconstruction — the method used to figure out how much radiation people were exposed to — is at best unreliable, at worst, deceptive," Folkers said.

Writing this week in Beyond Nuclear International, Folkers lays out how even researchers who did find elevated rates of cancers and other radiation-related illnesses were forbidden from tying these to the nuclear accident because of the proscriptive court order.
The only study able to do so, by Steven Wing et al., was conducted independently and used meteorological data to establish where the radiation plumes traveled that were released from TMI. Researchers then drew blood from people in these plume pathways who complained of symptoms associated with higher radiation exposure: vomiting, diarrhea, and skin reddening (erythema).

Using a chromosome test initially established in the mid 20th century and honed during examination of Chernobyl liquidators, researchers determined that the public in these plumes received 600-900 milligrays of radiation exposure — thousands of times higher than annual natural background doses; and very much higher than research paid for by the Fund could ever have assessed.

“Despite the evidence in human blood, lived experience of the exposed, recognition of faulty monitors, and increases of cancers, the constant false narrative that TMI caused no harm remains,” Folkers concluded. “The faulty science that plagues the residents around TMI also pervades other radiation studies assessing health impact, including those following explosions at Chernobyl and Fukushima. We are still all impacted by this scientific and legal failing surrounding TMI, which makes it much harder to assess radiation’s impact on human health.”

Folkers’ full article with citations can be found on the Beyond Nuclear International website.