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Physician insists workers' ailments tied to PCBs

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A physician said Friday that workers at a stained glass window shop in Oakland showed "pretty clear evidence" of exposure to toxic PCBs.

"These are real physical diseases that you can't make up," said Dr. Leslie Hilger, an Oakland dermatologist who specializes in industry-related illnesses. "This thing is for real."

Hilger's comments came in contrast to a state health official's assertion that an investigation had turned up no cause for the mysterious illnesses at New Renaissance Glass Works, 5151 Broadway. Hilger has treated many of the shop's 22 employees for skin rashes.

In addition to the rashes, workers say they've suffered from nausea, pneumonia, irregular menstrual periods and other ailments since last December.

They trace the problems to several fluorescent light fixtures at the shop that overheated and leaked a fluid containing PCBs.

The chemical is a fire-resistant oil that is suspected of causing a wide range of health problems.

"The symptoms are all diffused," claimed Richard Wade, chief of health for the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

But Hilger felt differently.

"When you see a whole bunch of it in one shot with no other explanation," Hilger said, "you don't need to be hit by a truck."

"Cal-OSHA, I think, wishes the whole thing would fade away," he said.

On Friday, a Cal-OSHA hygienist collected air and dust samples from the shop to check for contamination from PCBs.

But hygienist Richard Beall said earlier tests had shown no hazardous levels of the chemical.

"I'm the third person to come out and test for it," he said. "The other two people didn't find anything."

Emmett Jones, chief of Cal-OSHA's consultation service, said he would nonetheless order a rush job on the test samples. He said the results might be in by late next week.

The latest round of tests came after shop owner Dianne Laney said a private firm she hired found seemingly high levels of PCBs in the dust at her business.

After getting the report Monday, Laney laid off several workers and barred customers from entering the warehouse-style building. All business is conducted through the front door.

Cal-OSHA's Wade said he didn't believe the level of PCBs was high enough to make workers sick.

He added, however, that, "If we have any evidence of illness that appears related to work, we want to look into it."

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