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High cancer rate in Oakland office

1407
20 state employees have contracted
disease in five-year period; one dead

By Gerald Davis
The Tribune

Employees at the main Oakland office of the state's Employment Development Department report a high cancer rate among co-workers, and researchers say it may be due to a toxic "time bomb" of indoor pollution ticking away in some modern office buildings.

According to a list drawn up by employees at the 1225 4th Ave. EDD office, 20 persons who worked there during the past five years have contracted a variety of cancer types. The office has a work force of 100, and no figures were immediately available on the total number who worked there during the period.

Six of the victims contracted breast cancer and five have lung cancer, employees say. One has died.

Sixteen of the victims have been women, a reflection of the sexual composition of the staff, according to employees.

EDD office manager Chuck Robinson expressed surprise and disbelief about the report. He said he has not been told of the alleged problem. An employee representative confirmed she had not yet taken the matter up with Robinson, who assumed responsibility for the office in September.

The reported high rates of office-worker cancer surfaced during a hearing Tuesday in Los Angeles of the Assembly Committee on Consumer Protection and Toxic Materials. Dr. Alex Kelter, chief epidemiologist of the state Department of Health Services, and UC Berkeley environmental research specialist Hal Levin testified about high incidences of the disease at two state office buildings.

Only the Sacramento office of CalTrans was specifically named. There, a tenfold in-

crease in melanoma (skin cancer) has been reported among employees, according to Kelter.

At the other state office, according to Levin, there had been 18 cancer cases in five years among a staff of 100. He did not name the building, saying he would do so in a report later this week.

However, employees at the Oakland EDD office told The Tribune on Wednesday that their workplace is the one studied by Levin, and that two additional cancer cases had developed.

According to Kelter and Levin, the cancer symptoms may be blamed on the fluorescent light fixtures that may leak PCBs (polychlorinated biphenols) and on the proliferation of synthetic wood materials that emit formaldehyde fibers.

Levin said most carcinogenic pollution problems are found in buildings built after World War II, which more often lack natural ventilation and are made of a variety of synthetic materials.

Levin also identified a higher skin cancer rate at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory than at its companion Los Alamos nuclear research facility in New Mexico. He theorized that the building, not the research, could be the cause.

"We have to recognize that we may be sitting in a time bomb that will explode at the birth of the next generation with more cancers and birth defects and other illnesses," Levin told the Assembly committee.

Employees at the Oakland EDD office told The Tribune that they have been nervously watching co-workers come down with cancer.

"Employees started coming

See CANCER, Back Page

Cancer from

to me saying gosh, somebody else has come down with cancer. Why are all these people coming down with cancer?" said June Royal, a shop steward at the office for the California State Employees Association.

Said employee Joanne Iserloth: "I feel threatened. There's quite a few of us who would make that statement."

Royal said she told former office manager Bill Becker, and a probe by the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration ensued in August.

Royal and present office manager Robinson said the agency checked for possible asbestos contamination. Finding none, "they gave us a clean bill of health," said Robinson.

Another Oakland employee, who requested anonymity, said she had contacted Levin, who she said made a visual inspection of the office in August.

While Levin would not confirm his study of the Oakland office, he did offer several theories Wednesday for the high cancer rate, stressing that they are only theories that require further study.

■ Small transformers in older fluorescent light fixtures may be leaking carcinogenic PCBs. Environmental Protection Agency research indicates higher PCBs levels in office buildings, said Levin.

Installation of the PCBs-laden fluorescent fixtures was discontinued in 1972, said Levin. The Sacramento office building was constructed in 1969. The Oakland office was built in 1963.

Though the transformers "should be good for only seven-10 years, we know that what's supposed to be, and what is, are not always the same," remarked Levin.

■ A synergetic effect between fluorescent lighting and optical brightening agents used in clothing dyes and laundry products. He cited a 1969 study in which all the mice exposed to the brightening agents along with ultraviolet radiation contracted cancerous tumors and died.

Ultraviolet light is in the invisible band of the light spectrum, but more of it is emitted from fluorescent lights than from incandescent ones, Levin explained.

■ Ultraviolet light by itself could cause cell abnormalities leading to cancer, said Levin. So could formaldehyde, he said.

Dr. C.B. Meyer, a professor of chemistry at the University of Washington, recommended in a letter to the Assembly committee that California require manufacturers to disclose formaldehyde emission rates for all plywood, particleboard and fiberboard so that agencies can select those with the lowest emissions.