State launches cancer probe following PCB finds in fish

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By CHAT BLAKEMAN

Concern about possible health hazards from the chemical PCB has prompted the state Health Department to begin a statistical survey of cancer and cancer-related deaths in the Tri-County area.

The study, to deal specifically with liver cancer and possibly pancreas and bladder cancer, will be based on information contained in the New York State Cancer Registry, said Dr. William S. Burnett of the state's Bureau of Cancer Control. It is to cover Warren, Washington and Saratoga counties from 1970 to the present.

The action represents the latest in a series of moves by the state regarding the chemical, which enters the Hudson River in discharges from General Electric plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward. Already the state has warned consumers to refrain from eating striped bass caught in the river and to limit their consumption of other species to one serving a week.

Burnett said the studies were "routine" and are conducted whenever the state feels a health problem may exist. There have been no reported cases of PCB-linked deaths or illness in the area, but Burnett said the Health Department wanted to make "absolutely certain" the chemical was not affecting human health.

Primary liver cancer caused 144 deaths in upstate New York in 1973 and is considered "extremely rare" Burnett said. Figures on its incidence in the Tri-County area were unavailable this morning.

The furor over PCB began earlier this month when tests indicated several species of fish contained levels of it in excess of the five parts per million considered safe by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In addition to the warning about consuming fish taken from the river, the Health Department announced it would begin statewide tests of drinking water to determine if unhealthy amounts of the chemical were entering municipal water systems.

One of the first target areas was Waterford, the nearest municipality south of the GE plants which draws its drinking water from the Hudson. Tests made several years ago found traces of the chemical in the district's water supply, but in amounts health department officials said posed no threat to health.

Although GE's discharge into the river is the only one documented to contain the chemical, firms in Buffalo, Brooklyn, Queens and Bay Shore also use PCB in their manufacturing processes. GE is under government order to reduce the amount it discharges to several ounces by 1977. At one time it was discharging about 30 pounds a day.

A spokesman for GE was unavailable for comment this morning.

Government officials and private researchers are uncertain about the threat PCB may pose to human health. It is a chemical, however, which is attracting the same amount of attention DDT did in the 1960's, one official of the state Department of Environmental Conservation said last week.

Dr. James Allen of the University of Wisconsin Medical School has reported that monkeys fed regularly with a diet containing 2.5 to 300 parts per million of the chemical showed redness of skin, facial swelling, acne, loss of hair and irregularity of menstral cycles. The research has also shown the chemical can affect reproductive capability.

In another study, Dr. Renata Kimlow of the toxology branch of the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, found the chemical had a cancer-producing effect "of a very low order" in rats exposed to the chemical for a lifetime.

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