Don - Perhaps he needs your good attention!

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The PCB poisoning that wasn't — how careful checking ruins a story

By DOUG FOSTER
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"Another great story destroyed by responsible journalism."

That bittersweet line doesn't salvage the feelings of reporters who labor mightily on a particular story, then watch in frustration as it dies a sudden death. But it does describe more work on a daily newspaper than media critics might suspect.

So it was with a story that seemed to have all the elements of a grabber. A man in Prunedale, a respected mobilehome park owner, believed he had been poisoned with PCB-contaminated transformer oil.

PCBs, the most insidious and persistent chemical known to human beings, have been dropped from production by Monsanto after being linked to cancer and birth defects.

The Prunedale man believed he'd been slowly poisoned ever since a Pacific Gas and Electric meter reader gave him a cannister of transformer oil to use in his jewelry-making shop four years ago.

For years, he'd used the oil without ill effects.

But one month ago, he was stricken.

"I went into the shop, worked there for awhile. All of a sudden I felt a pain above the abdomen. I was literally screaming in pain all the way to the hospital," the man said during an extensive interview.

The story offered several avenues of pursuit, and during the next day's investigation, all checked out:

— After several days of emergency hospital tests, doctors could not pinpoint an organic cause for the Prunedale man's illness;

— In PG&E's Salinas office, two workmen were dispatched to pick up the transformer oil cannister, and it appeared the cannister had, in fact, come from PG&E;

— A PG&E spokesmen at corporate headquarters in San Francisco said it "was quite possible" that transformer oil used before 1977 was contaminated with PCBs.

The PG&E public relations department was still reeling slightly from a series of stories in the San Francisco Chronicle which put a spotlight of public attention on PG&E's use of PCBs in transformers and capacitors.

The stories scored PG&E for sloppy cleanup after PCB spills, and inadequate training and protection for PG&E workers.

While the stories ran, a capacitor exploded in Watsonville, spilling PCBs over the mayor's home.

With all that material ready to go, then came a difficult decision.

A call to Monterey County Environmental Health chief Walter Wong and to officials in the state Department of Health Services revealed that testing of the material would take, at the least, a few days. Should the story run as is, or wait for the test?

For those who have never worked in the news business, it's hard to explain the highly competitive scramble and sometimes wacky sense of urgency that plagues it.

Most newspapers, television stations, and radio reporters care most, of course, about getting the story right, but every editor or news director gets a special thrill, and better sales, by being first, too. (In the end, the North County News did print a story about the incident.)

There were other considerations, additional reasons to publish quickly besides crass competitiveness.

What if, as the Prunedale man initially claimed, there were hundreds of others also using the contaminated oil to cut jewelry stones? A story about his plight could serve as an early alert for those individuals.

But in this case — as in hundreds of others — caution prevailed, more because of an uneasy feeling, a hunch, than any scientific check sheet.

When state researchers and PG&E scientists testing samples called in with results last Tuesday, the hunch was confirmed.

Both laboratories showed the Prunedale man had been using oil contaminated with less than 1 part per million PCB, well below the government's danger levels.

Another story was washed up, destroyed by a persistent probe.

With a sad shake of his head, the reporter dejectedly set off on a new trail, while the Prunedale man heaved a sigh of relief that he was not, as he'd expected, in the grip of an illness sparked by one of the most dangerous chemicals ever produced.

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