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Employees treated for rashes after working in City Hall

By STEVE GEIMANN

A Binghamton doctor is treating five city workers for prolonged rashes and at least one case of an acne-type rash after they worked in the basement of City Hall.

Dr. F. Keith Kennedy said last night that he has prescribed antibiotics for one man with the acne-like rash, and is watching others who complained of the itchy, red rashes.

The City Hall basement showed some signs of contamination after the fire and explosion at the State Office Building 48 days ago, although officials could not link the rashes with the toxic chemical problem in the office tower.

The most frequent sign of contamination from exposure to the chemicals is a skin disease called chloracne — a rash with pimples and sores on various parts of the body. Sometimes, the condition looks like teen-age acne.

"These men are working in areas that were not isolated before, but are isolated now," Kennedy said last night during a meeting of doctors at Binghamton General Hospital.

Kennedy later identified the workers as maintenance workers and city police. The basement contains the mailroom, police lockers and several offices used by police officials.

Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, Broome County health commissioner, said he was stunned by the report, saying he unaware of any health problems.

Kennedy said the rashes, which he described as flat and appearing mostly on the hands, disappear after washing and does not recur when the men are away from work.

The revelation came during a meeting with Dr. George Roush, medical and environmental health director for Monsanto Co. of St. Louis, Mo., the firm that made the polychlorinated biphenyls used in the transformer that was damaged at the state tower on Feb. 3.

Roush said PCBs are minimally toxic and will not irritate the skin, and said chloracne was not associated with PCBs, although he said he would not be surprised to find the skin problem.

"We have had no experience with chloracne at Monsanto," Roush said. "And we've had lots of experience with PCBs. If there's an effect on health, it's not very much."

Roush said the dioxins and dibenzofurans in the soot are more toxic than the PCBs, and are extremely toxic to fetuses of laboratory animals. Tests have shown a variety of adverse health effects in animals, including liver problems, weight loss and enzyme production problems, he told the doctors.

In humans, Roush said an internal study of Monsanto workers exposed to the chemicals in 1949 showed no increase in death or cancer.

Roush also told the doctors that if the signs of contamination did not appear in a week, it was unlikely the person was affected.

Hospital officials last night reported testing more than 400 people for PCBs using blood and liver profiles, and more extensive testing is being performed at Met Patn Laboratories in Teterboro, N.J.

Meanwhile, cleanup crews will return to the basement and sub-basement of the government complex today to begin recleaning overhead pipes that show traces of toxic dust in new health department tests.

Edward A. Mosher, the state cleanup chief, said a dozen workers will use detergent and scrub brushes to clean the pipes "inch by inch" until the work is deemed satisfactory by county officials.

In a related development, the first state agencies began moving into the Columbus School yesterday, a process that will last until the middle of next week.