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State may require medical tests for PG&E workers

By Randy Wilson
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Despite the strong urging of federal health investigators almost two years ago, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. officials have balked at conducting medical tests on employees exposed to polychlorinated biphenyl, a chemical linked to cancer.

Those non-binding recommendations may soon become enforceable regulations, however, if PCB-related standards proposed by officials with the state Occupational Safety and Health Administration are approved later this year.

"We've encountered significant opposition from industry to medical surveillance," said Dr. Richard Wade, deputy chief for health with OSHA. "They feel it is of questionable value."

Tests conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found higher-than-normal concentrations of PCB in the blood of workers at PG&E's Decoto Pipeyard in Union City. The pipeyard is the central collection point in the utility's voluntary, three-year program to remove from service the 120,000 PCB-filled capacitors in northern California.

In a report issued in September 1980, Paul Pryor, an industrial hygienist with NIOSH, said PG&E's program for the maintenance and emergency handling of PCB spills afforded "reasonable" protection to employees. His recommendations for improvements included better sanitation, more extensive respiratory protection, environmental monitoring and medical surveillance of affected workers.

Ed Slingland, a spokesman for PG&E, said all but the last recommendation had been heeded by the utility.

"We didn't follow the medical surveillance recommendation because we felt there was nothing to gain from it," Slingland said.

In his report, Pryor proposed extensive annual medical checkups and tests as well as keeping medical records for up to 30 years after an employee has left PG&E. The federal government banned production of PCB in 1977 after tests on laboratory animals showed the chemical caused cancer of the liver and other ailments.

Although the federal government has established standards for allowable airborne PCB, there are no levels for skin contact and no mandatory testing or surveillance programs.

After his first report, Pryor conducted subsequent tests on 12 PG&E workers and found PCB blood concentrations ranging from 21 parts per billion to 70 parts per billion. NIOSH considers 30 parts of PCB per billion to be normal in the blood of people who do not work with PCB.

But Pryor has acknowledged that the higher PCB levels may be the result of worker practices before 1977 — they used the insulating oil as a cleaning agent to wash their hands. A major part of his subsequent report will focus on how to develop a baseline testing population on which to base future medical tests.

"One of the problems is what is adequate medical surveillance," said Wade of OSHA, which is moving ahead on its own PCB regulations in part because of Pryor's work.

Wade said the new regulations, if approved, would require PG&E and other companies whose workers come in contact with PCB to monitor signs of skin contact such as dermatitis and investigate pathological symptoms such as liver damage.

"PG&E has done a pretty good job of devising safety programs on their own," Wade said. "But they object to regulations."

Ron Fitzsimmons, health and safety director for Electrical Workers Union Local 1245, said he is working with OSHA officials on a draft of an ongoing medical surveillance program that he hopes will be ready next month.

"It would be nice if the surveillance had started two years ago," he said.

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