

Cancer victim now hunts other cancer cases



Staff Photo by Bill Luster

DR. J. BRADFORD BLOCK
Is adviser to state agency

By DENNIS POLITE

Louisville Times Staff Writer

Right after angiosarcoma became almost a household word in Louisville, so did the name J. Bradford Block.

Angiosarcoma is the rare liver cancer that has caused the deaths of five employees of B. F. Goodrich Co.'s chemical plant here. J. Bradford Block is medical consultant for the Kentucky Department of Labor.

Angiosarcoma was the killer and J. Bradford Block was the stalker. But this is not the first time Block and cancer have met.

When Block was a student in medical school he discovered he had another type of cancer. Doctors gave him six months to a year to live. That was about 10 years ago.

Now he is chasing angiosarcoma to find out what causes it.

His interest in the disease, he says, is sparked by his own bout with cancer. "I can understand how the guys (at Goodrich) feel. I was in a similar situation myself."

Surgery and radiation therapy ended the threat on Block's life and he went on to finish medical school in 1966.

Bellarmine graduate

Eleven years earlier he had graduated from Bellarmine College with an undergraduate degree in history.

He had wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, Block says, but he couldn't afford to go away to school.

He became interested in medicine

while at Bellarmine and decided to be a doctor. But first he went to the University of Louisville and got a master's degree in psychology.

He also got drafted — right when he had been admitted to medical school. He served two years in the Army with a medical unit in Georgia.

But the question in his mind when he found out he had cancer, he says, was not whether he would live or die, but whether he could stay in medical school. If he dropped out he would have to start all over again because of a pending change in curriculum.

He stayed in school through the treatment. "I was on call at the maternity ward while I was taking radiation and that the two things together just about killed me," he says.

Another master's degree

After medical school, Block went to the University of Cincinnati and in 1969 got a master's degree in environmental health.

Since January 1973 he has been medical consultant to the state Department of Labor. The job is to advise the department on medical regulations required in working places and to act as an adviser to businesses trying to comply with state regulations.

So Block became involved when B. F. Goodrich Co. announced in January that it suspected that three deaths of workers due to angiosarcoma may have been caused by exposure to chemicals, especially vinyl chloride. (The number of

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deaths later was upped to five, and two more deaths have been discovered.)

He had to consult with company medical authorities and the company had to report new cases to the Labor Department.

Block was not hesitant about telling the press about the cases reported to him. He was the source quoted while company public-relations officials were still trying to say it in their own terms.

But Block gives the company credit for bringing the cases to light. He says had it not been for the company's attentiveness to the health of its workers, the cancer cause may have not been discovered for a long time.

If, for instance, Block says, the men had all died of lung cancer there would have been little reason to suspect that the cancer may have been caused by some work-related condition.

/ One doctor saw all the records

But because one company doctor saw all of the Goodrich medical records, Block says, he was able to recognize the significance of the cases.

Block is a man of medium build with thinning hair. He appears to be an achiever but he is not boastful about it. Neither is he bashful about answering questions on some of the accomplishments in his life.

He is certified in occupational medicine by the American Board of Preventive Medicine. That is a certification that takes about five years, he says.

In 1972 he was elected a fellow of the

American College of Preventive Medicine and he is president-elect of the Kentucky Industrial Medical Association.

Block is 40 years old and he says he has seen some times that were not always the easiest to live through.

But when he talks about some of those times, he seems to be counting blessings.

With his cancer, for example, he says that if he had gotten the disease a year earlier he would have had to go away for treatment. Radiation therapy was not available in Louisville until the year he took it.

And his military service — despite delaying his entrance into medical school — gave him some experience in medical areas.

When Block was being treated for cancer there were six other cases of the same general type discovered around the same time. Only Block and another man are still alive, he says, and the other man's condition may not have been the same cancer.

Since the Goodrich cases, Block has recommended to the state Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board that the exposure levels of vinyl chloride be lowered, and the chemical added to a list of cancer-causing agents.

The board, with little reluctance, accepted Block's recommendations, and made the state standards the toughest in the nation, he says.

Block is proud of that and is also working with the University of Louisville and the University of Cincinnati on other projects that might explain more about the nature and causes of angiosarcoma.

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