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PCB found in woman's breast milk

By BETH GAEDDERT
News Staff

The breast milk of a Lafayette woman living on the farm where 17 barrels of polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCB, were discovered last week is contaminated with the chemical, but in levels below what is considered dangerous in cow's milk, state officials said Wednesday.

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Marie Darling, 29, has decided to continue breast-feeding her son, Matthew, who will be a year old on Friday.

Health officials, who have found evidence of the cancer-causing chemical in soil around the barn yard, in chicken eggs and the fatty tissue of a chicken from the farm, will take more samples for testing Thursday.

They recommended that Darling stop breast-feeding the infant. Future tests will include blood samples from the Darlings and a half-dozen of their friends who have eaten eggs from the farm's chickens.

Wayne Darling, 32, Marie's husband, said Wednesday that the couple, who are vegetarians, decided she should continue to breast-feed their son because they believe cow's milk could contain higher levels of the chemical.

They also believe in the advantages of breast-feeding and say they are supported in their decision to continue now by their family doctor and the La Leche League, an organization which promotes breast-feeding of babies.

Darling said he appreciated a recent visit by Dr. John Donnelly, head of the Boulder County Health Department, who came "to allay our fears" about contamination by the chemical. But Darling said, "I'm concerned about the long-range effects, and they can't give us conclusive answers."

The complex, man-made chemical, the production of which was ordered halted by the government, was used primarily as a heat conductor and insulator for such things as electrical transformers.

Health officials say it can cause cancer, skin rashes, liver damage, fetal deformities and mutations in future generations.

Darling noticed barrels lying near a barn on the couple's rented farm two years ago and called the Monsanto Chemical Corp. A company representative told him the chemical was dangerous, but gave him no cause to be alarmed, he said.

On Tuesday, two Monsanto representatives called him to ask if he had any questions about the chemical. Darling said the men told him that a 1978 study showed PCB didn't cause cancer, and that they believed humans have a tolerance for it.

Darling called health officials last week after watching a public television show on the dangers of modern chemicals.

Ken Mesch, a county health officer, said samples will be taken Thursday at the Marshall landfill, where two barrels from the Darling property were hauled a year ago.

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PCB at Lafayette

Toxic chemical found at farm

By NANCY TRAVER

LAFAYETTE — For five years, Lafayette resident Wayne Darling had wondered what was inside the rusty old barrels stored behind his barn.

Darling discovered this week the 17 barrels contain PCB, a potentially carcinogenic chemical. Investigators from the Boulder County Health Department and the federal Environmental Protection Agency have confirmed the chemical can cause cancer or congenital defects.

Darling, who leases the farmhouse and barn, noticed when he moved in that each barrel was stamped with a Monsanto label. He decided two years ago to contact the Denver office of the national chemical manufacturing firm. A salesman from the company visited the farm, located one mile west of Lafayette, and said the barrels contained electrical transforming oil that had a PCB base.

"We started to worry when the salesman told us the product in the barrels had been banned from production," Darling said. "I gathered the stuff was dangerous but the salesmen didn't try to warn us about having it around."

County and state health officials conducted tests on three barrels and told Darling Friday they contained PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyl.

EPA officials took soil samples from the area to determine whether the chemical is leaking from the drums. Water, milk and animal tissues also will be analyzed in the next several days, officials said. The chemicals will be placed in leak-proof barrels and transported to a disposal site, according to health officials.

Darling, who lives with his wife, Marie, and their 1-year-old son, said the family may move from the farm.

"We never paid too much attention to the barrels and the back of the barn isn't somewhere we used to go a lot," Darling said. "The officials said we probably couldn't be harmed by touching it but by eating a cow that had grazed on ground contaminated by PCB."

Darling said the carcinogens might have gone undetected had he not watched a show about PCB on an educational television station last week. The show revealed the toxic effects of the chemical and led Darling to seek help from the local town government and fire department.

He called the Boulder County Health Department but received only a promise that a staff member would look into the matter and return his call later.

"My wife finally called the (University of Colorado) Daily newspaper and a reporter there did all the work for us," Darling said. "The reporter called the health department and the federal government and got somebody to come out to our place."

Darling reported Monsanto representatives seemed unconcerned about the presence of the chemical.

"To me, that's just not right," Darling said. "The company made it and should be held accountable for it. We understand the stuff wasn't even banned from the market until April 1979."

Monsanto spokesmen were unavailable for comment Friday.

EPA officials have promised to remove the barrels, Darling said. PCB cannot be destroyed but is safe when stored in leak-proof containers, according to the EPA.

If there is danger of contamination, the former resident of the farmhouse may be in even greater danger than the Darling family. He used the contents of the barrels to keep down the dust on the driveway and as a wood preservative, Darling said.

"My only interest right now is that the government or the company people move their tail and get rid of the stuff," he said.