

Illegal PCB Dump 'Uncovered' at State Hospital

By Ann Bancroft

Twenty-one electrical transformers, containing up to 200 gallons of highly toxic PCBs, are being illegally stored on the grounds of Sonoma State Hospital in a wooded area used by patients for hiking and picnicking, state and federal investigators discovered yesterday.

The illegal storage area, where the leaky transformers are placed on wooden pallets over the soil, is on an oak-covered knoll adjacent to the hospital's water treatment plant and about 100 feet uphill from an enclosed reservoir.

The problem came to light early this week after a hospital teacher's aide saw the transformers while she was leading a group of patients on a hike behind the hospital. Located near Glen Ellen, Sonoma State Hospital serves more than 1500 mentally retarded patients.

All but four of the transformers were marked with bright yellow PCB warning stickers advising of the chemical's hazards.

The aide called the Sonoma-based PCB Project, a non-profit organization devoted to exposure and cleanup of PCB spills, and project workers notified the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

According to an EPA source, the agency had been advised of the storage area nearly three months ago, but no inspector was sent to the site.

Yesterday, inspectors from the EPA and the state Department of Health Services scoured the site with hospital officials, taking soil samples and asking why it was that officials had not been informed of the strict regulations regarding storage of PCBs.

Dr. Patrick L. Martin, executive director of Sonoma State Hos-

pital, said that, while it has been a hospital practice for the past 15 years to dump the transformers in the woody area, he did not become aware of the problem until yesterday.

"Our guidelines did not focus on storage (of PCBs), but on transportation," said Martin, appearing slightly chagrined.

According to Martin, the Sonoma hospital officials had not been advised of the hazards of PCBs until February 1979 when they received a short memorandum from the health department's Hazardous Materials Management Section.

While the memorandum stated that "the department considers PCB to be an extremely hazardous waste," it did not advise the hospital of the stringent regulations governing storage of PCBs.

Since the receipt of the memo, Martin said, the hospital's electrical department supervisor has made monthly inspections of the storage site.

"He gives it an eyeball inspection, and if he sees any change in them (the transformers) he makes sure they're battened down," he said.

He said electrical workers at the hospital are not provided with protective clothing for work around PCBs, as is required by the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

PCBs, long considered by physicians and scientists to be a health hazard, were banned in 1978. The chemicals remain in legal use in "closed systems" by utility companies and in large installations that run electrical plants, such as the one at Sonoma State Hospital.

The EPA requires that PCBs must be stored in enclosed, marked barrels, within a concrete structure surrounded by a moat, to prevent any possibility of their leaking into the environment.

State and federal inspectors were cautious yesterday about discussing the potential dangers of the hospital's illegal storage site.

"They should be stored in a more secure location," allowed Paul Williams, waste management specialist for the health department. "But we won't know what the hazards are until we get the samples back."

EPA inspector Daniel Horgan was more candid. "It's pretty apparent," he said, "that those are PCBs and this is an unauthorized storage site."

If, after the samples are analyzed for PCB levels, the hospital is found to be in violation of EPA regulations, the institution could be fined as much as \$25,000 for each day the violation continues.

The federal and state inspectors estimated it would take up to two weeks to receive results of the samples taken at the site.

The transformers at the site, some as large as four feet tall and two feet in diameter, were covered with a black, oily substance that had apparently dripped from the tops of the transformers onto the ground. Although the state Department of Health Services is charged with enforcement and regulation of hazardous substances in California, Williams said the department "hasn't made any investigations of institutions" to determine whether they're in compliance with toxic substances laws.