

Explosion Sprays PCB Downtown

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Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

The toxic chemical PCB was sprayed into a downtown street Sunday night by the explosion of a Union Electric Co. transformer underneath a sidewalk, the Post-Dispatch has learned.

As a result, personnel at Barnes Hospital look elaborate decontamination procedures while treating a woman drenched by transformer oil in the explosion.

Health and environmental officials said they were relieved the explosion had not resulted in a fire. PCB transformer fires in recent years have forced evacuations in business districts of other cities, including Chicago, San Francisco and Washington, N.Y.

In St. Louis, work crews for UE completed cleaning the explosion site in front of 615 North Seventh Street late Monday, said Dana Martin, coordinator of environmental emergency response for the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

"From their description of the procedures used, it sounded like a very good job on the cleanup," Martin said. "They used various solvents and special detergents that sopped up the oil."

There shouldn't be any problem of contamination there. As far as we're concerned, the case is closed."

PCBs, short for polychlorinated biphenyls, were manufactured in this country by the Monsanto Co. from 1928 to 1977 primarily for use as insulating fluids and coolants in electrical equipment and machinery. Their manufacture was banned in 1979 because they were found to cause cancer.

The transformer on North Seventh Street contained 333 gallons of transformer oil of a kind that is about 99 percent PCB, said William B. Ropes Jr., city health commissioner. The explosion released about 58 gallons of the Ropes said. A small part of that sprayed through a sidewalk grate late in the street, onto the sidewalk and against a building, he said.



Union Electric workmen cleaning Seventh Street just south of Lucas Avenue where a transformer explosion

Sunday sprayed the toxic chemical PCB. One woman was doused by the spray.

Larry Williams/Post-Dispatch

Maple Hayes, 35, of the 1400 block of North Ninth Street, was rushed by the oil as she walked past the grate, police said. She was treated at Barnes. She was treated with soap and water, then with alcohol and again with soap and water, a spokeswoman at Barnes said.

"We took her clothes, double-bagged them, and UE picked them up for safe disposal," the spokeswoman said.

The room where Ms. Hayes was treated and all hospital employees who had contact with her, including attendants and

housekeepers, were scrubbed afterward to prevent contamination, the spokeswoman said.

The ambulance that took her to the hospital was decontaminated, and the attendants were washed down, health officials said.

Ropes said washing was an effective way of decontamination. "Absorption through the skin would take many hours of almost constant contact with the skin," he said. "In this case, not enough time passed for that to have occurred."

He said city Health Division employees would take "wipe samples" in the area where the transformer oil had spilled to make sure no PCB contamination remained.

"From all we know, there should be no hazard at all to the public walking on the sidewalk there," Ropes said.

Officials of Union Electric were unavailable for comment Tuesday. A spokeswoman said Sunday that an "internal fault" in mechanism apparently had caused the explosion.