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"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Then what's that elephant doing standing behind you with bread in his ears?" questioned the agent.

"Sir, what I put in my sandwiches is my own business!"

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THE day after Mrs. Zelkin's funeral, the rabbi dropped by the house to console the widower. To his astonishment he saw the bereaved on the sofa kissing a dazzling redhead.

"Zelkin!" roared the rabbi. "Your beloved wife is not even cold in her grave, and already you're . . ."

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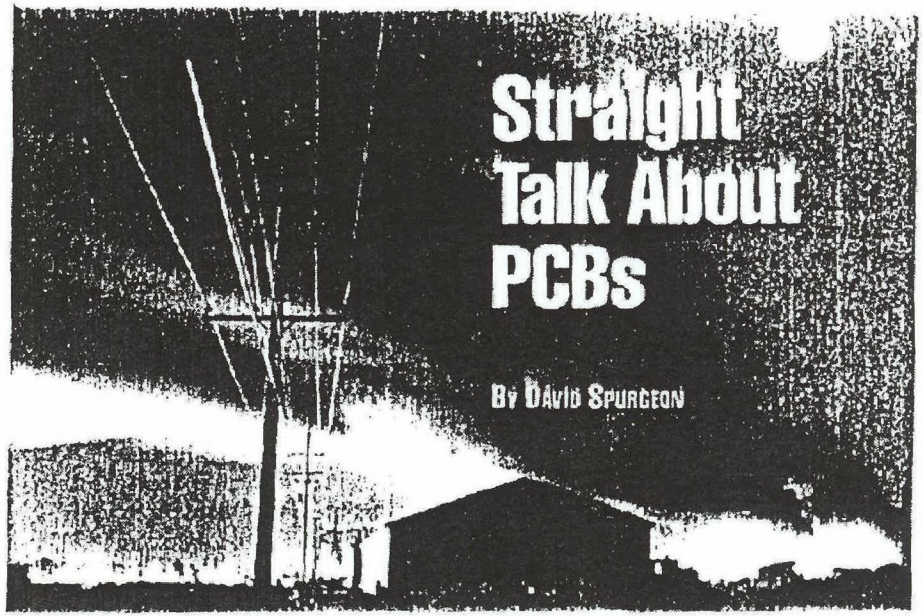

Straight Talk About PCBs

By David Spurgeon

In August 1988, toxic fumes from a fire in a PCB storage site at St. Basile le Grand, Que., prompted evacuation of 5200 residents from that town and the neighbouring municipalities of Ste. Julie and St. Bruno. Two years later, despite public concern and federal and provincial government promises to rid Canada of PCBs so such health threats cannot recur, thousands of tonnes of the compound remain in use in electrical and mechanical equipment. And more than 100,000 tonnes of PCB-contaminated wastes are still stored across the country.

But are PCBs as hazardous as is generally believed? What are the facts? Science writer David Spurgeon has prepared this question-and-answer report, based on research and interviews with top authorities.

Q **Why were PCBs manufactured in the first place?**

A PCBs – polychlorinated biphenyls – are synthetic chemical compounds first developed in 1881. Because they are good insulators and fire resistant, they were used widely in industrial electrical equipment. Until their manufacture was banned in 1977, they were also used in a great variety of other applications; as plasticizers, for example, in sealants, caulkings, rubbers, paints and waxes.

Q **Where are they today?**

A The federal Department of the Environment says approximately 22,100 tonnes of askarel fluids

PHOTO: ©ROBERT GIROUX/CANAPRESS

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PHARMACIA'S EXHIBIT 1216

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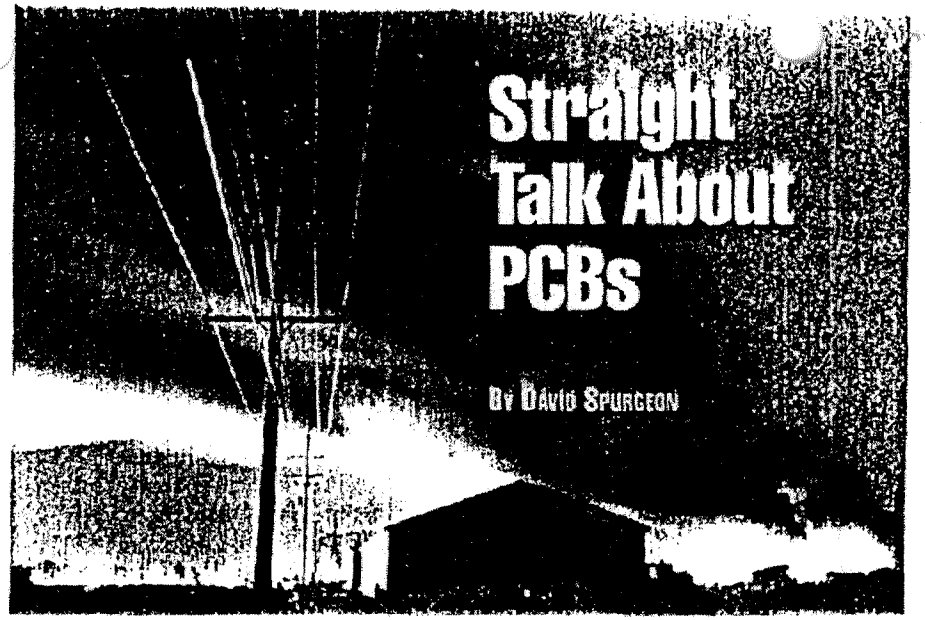

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(liquid PCBs) remain in Canada, of which about 18,600 tonnes are still in use in electrical equipment, such as transformers, and some 3500 tonnes are stored for disposal. In addition, 116,000 tonnes of PCB-contaminated wastes such as soil, absorbents, solvents and debris are stored across the country. There are 3013 PCB storage sites, including 1811 that are storing askarel fluids.

Q How did public concern arise?

A It began in 1966 when PCBs, which we now know can cause cancer in laboratory animals, were discovered in the fatty tissue of a white-tailed eagle found dead in the Stockholm Archipelago and analyzed by Sören Jensen, a Swedish scientist searching for DDT. Concern was heightened in 1968 when more than a thousand Japanese were poisoned by eating rice oil contaminated by PCBs. Victims developed numerous symptoms including acne, swollen limbs, jaundice and fever.

Q Is this concern exaggerated?

A The University of Toronto's Institute for Environmental Studies conducted a seminar in November 1989 to "combat the type of widespread near-hysteria" that occurred when PCBs from Quebec, slated for disposal in Wales, were shipped back to this country. Stephen Safe, a Canadian expert on PCBs now at Texas A&M University, noted that the poisoning in Japan was an accident in which a PCB by-product in contaminated cooking oil was actually eaten.

In occupationally exposed people, Safe said, the short-term toxic effects caused by PCBs are usually relatively minor and disappear after the exposure ceases. Workers exposed to PCBs at high levels exhibit mortality and overall cancer rates which are not significantly different from that of the general population. "In terms of adverse human health effects," he said, "the data suggest that PCBs are not the deadly, dangerous toxins that we've all been led to believe."

Q Does this mean PCBs are harmless?

A No. One reason PCBs were useful industrially was that they were stable; they did not easily change their chemical composition. This same property makes them persist in the environment once released. They have been found even in the remote Arctic.

The toxic effects on laboratory animals noted in repeated low-level PCB exposure and the chemical's persistence in the environment suggest PCBs can seriously affect the earth's ecosystems, according to Environment Canada. They also accumulate in the food chain so that people eating fish, for example, get a higher concentration of the chemicals than the fish did when it ate its PCB-contaminated food. Noting that some cancers take up to 30 years to develop, Dr. Emmanual Farber, a pathologist at the University of Toronto, cautions that it may be too early to see evidence of all the ill-effects that PCBs may produce on both human health and the environment.

Q How do PCBs enter the environment?

A More than half the PCBs produced have been discarded in landfill sites in plastics, paints and electrical equipment. Contaminants from these can enter groundwater or be carried by rain and snow into nearby waterways. If wastes are burned incompletely, PCBs may be released as combustion gases and return to earth in rain or snow or as minute dry particles. Leaks from electrical transformers and capacitors, and runoff from roads of dust-suppressant oils are other sources.

Q What are the dangers of PCB fires?

A Burned at temperatures less than 1200°, PCBs can produce furans and dioxins. These chemical compounds can be thousands of times more toxic than PCBs and can spread through the air and water and contaminate soil. That was why parts of St. Basile le Grand and two other towns were evacuated. Residents were allowed to return only after the Quebec government reported testing of soot, soil, water and exterior surfaces indicated no significant long-term health risk.

Q What have our governments done to eliminate PCB wastes?

A Not enough. By 1988 a slow phase-out program begun in 1977 had led to only a slight decline in the level of PCBs remaining in the environment. But in September 1988, in the wake of the St. Basile le Grand fire, the federal government announced "a comprehensive action plan to destroy PCBs at federal facilities across Canada." The following month, the Canadian Council of Environment Ministers agreed to shift the emphasis of their PCB program from storage to destruction, which would be carried out as far as possible within Canada. That meant incinerators would have to be made available that met Ottawa's standards of a *minimum* PCB removal efficiency of 99.9999 percent – destroying at the least, in other words, all but one part per million.

However, until a portable incinerator began operation in Goose Bay, Labrador, in January 1990, the only equipment in Canada capable of burning solid PCBs was an American-owned mobile treatment system being tested near Swan Hills, Alta.

The federal government itself failed to meet its goal of ensuring "that no low-level PCB wastes remain on federal sites by the fall

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of 1989." Although incineration is not necessary in the treatment of low-level PCB-contaminated mineral oil, only 33 percent of this oil on federal sites had been eliminated by the end of 1989, and 136 tonnes remained in storage.

Q **How much PCB waste was destroyed in 1989?**

A More than 2500 tonnes of PCB wastes were destroyed by incineration, and more than 5800 tonnes of low-level PCB waste – mineral oil contaminated by the compounds – were chemically decontaminated under the federal-provincial program. That's only a small part of the total to be treated.

Q **What can we as individual citizens do?**

A Any individual has the right under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act of 1988 to seek an injunction to stop polluters from exposing people and the environment to toxic substances. And any two adults residing in Canada can petition the federal minister of the environment to investigate an offence.

Beware of the not-in-my-backyard phenomenon. Says Steve Hart, director of the Federal Waste Management Branch of Environment Canada, "A major problem is getting people to agree to having PCB incinerators near any community." When oils containing PCBs were to be burned in high-temperature cement manufacturing kilns at Joliette, Que., in a trial incineration last fall, concerned citizens from three communities blocked the test by putting pressure on their municipal councils.

Insist to your elected representatives in Ottawa, and your provincial legislature, that governments carry out their promised PCB destruction programs, that all PCBs be removed from populated areas, and that high standards for toxic waste sites be maintained.

Call to Order

AD EXECUTIVE Charlotte Beers was elected to head the American Association of Advertising Agencies last year. Beers explained that she had examined her possible titles in the light of current trends, and the choices included chairchick, chairleader and chair-atola.

"I settled for chairman," she said. – Philip H. Dougherty in *The New York Times*

Risqué Business. In attempting to announce that his wife and a visiting friend would play a violin duet, the speaker's introduction came out this way: "My friend John will now come up to the platform and fiddle with my wife." – L. S.

When the Lord made her, he forgot to add malice or guile

Most Beautiful Girl in the World

Condensed from ESQUIRE
STANLEY BING



IT WAS the last autumn of innocence, I think. Boston was green and gold and all kinds of bright orange, vermilion and paisley; the air so crisp and fresh. The Red Sox had just won the sixth game of the best World Series ever, and all things were possible.

I was standing on the subway platform. Down at the end of the station sat a midsize ersatz collie, just beyond puppyhood, laughing. Her eyes glowed with a tremendous good nature and trust. She was alone.

"Hi," I said. She came over, licked my hand discreetly, allowed herself to be scratched for a time, chased her tail in a dignified circle and lay down again. I remember thinking, *There are times God puts a choice in front of you.* I took the dog.

She went totally nuts when she understood the news, bounding and leaping in a vertical parabola to kiss

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