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Complaints Spur PCB Investigation In U.S. Buildings

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After repeated complaints by 43 government electricians—who say that daily, on-the-job exposure to the deadly chemical PCB has endangered their health—the General Services Administration brought in a team of investigators yesterday to determine the extent of PCB contamination in government buildings.

A GSA spokesman said a team of industrial hygienists from the Cincinnati office of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, the research arm of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, flew into Washington yesterday "to determine what types of testing and procedures will be necessary to evaluate our PCB problems."

The request for the NIOSH study came after the electricians who maintain and repair electrical transformers in area government buildings complained that they were developing skin rashes, headaches and fatigue after coming in contact with PCB.

The tests will be conducted in all federal buildings and at two facilities, in Bladensburg and at 10 P St. SW, where the GSA has been storing leaking, rusting drums filled with the chemical.

When inhaled, PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) has been found to cause cancer in animals and to attack the immunization system of humans. Though its manufacture was outlawed in 1976, it is still used as a lubricant

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PCB in U.S. Offices Probed

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and high-temperature coolant in electrical transformers and industrial machinery.

The 43 electricians—and possibly other workers who have been exposed to PCB—will undergo tests at the Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore sometime next week, according to Ted Leninger, the GSA's director of building operations.

Sidney Wolfe, of Ralph Nader's Health Research Group, said yesterday that at least one-third of all federal office buildings in Washington have transformers leaking PCB. Those buildings include the White House, where a transformer reportedly leaked PCB Monday night, according to Wolfe.

But the problem, he said, "is that federal agencies are exempt from OSHA and NIOSH regulations and practices. Under federal rules, each agency is to develop its own occupational safety and health standards—it's kind of a double standard for federal employes.

"The workers are not given gloves or body suits ... Anytime you see some PCB spilled on the floor, the chances are that workers are going to be breathing excessive amounts of the stuff," Wolfe said.

Phillip. Bierbaum, a Cincinnati-based spokesman for NIOSH, called yesterday's trip to Washington "a fact-finding expedition .... We will be working toward deciding what protection for the workers will be necessary and what kind of sampling and testing procedures will be used."

A fuller scale investigation, he said, will be started by Monday.

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