

# U-turn on dockyard radiation claims

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MINISTERS have conceded that nuclear dockyard workers were exposed to high levels of radiation which may have caused them to contract cancer.

After a long campaign by the families of people who worked on Britain's nuclear submarine fleet at Chatham in Kent, the Government has accepted that illnesses suffered by former workers could be linked to radiation levels to which they were exposed at work.

The change of attitude could also open the door to compensation claims from former workers at Rosyth naval dockyard in Fife.

Since May last year, former workers at the nuclear dockyards in both Scotland and England have been able to call a

special Ministry of Defence phoneline to discuss fears about how their work has affected their health.

The under-secretary of state for defence, John Spellar, told a BBC documentary: "We do accept that some individuals who worked in nuclear dockyards had levels of radiation that were high and have acquired cancers which could possibly be due to radiation."

The Government was keen to help former workers access their medical histories and "get a satisfactory resolution to their claims", he said.

A number of dockyard workers who serviced the nuclear submarines are either suffering – or have already died – of illnesses campaigners say resulted from the high radiation to which they were exposed. But

some workers discovered that the MoD did not have adequate records of their dosage levels. Mr Spellar disclosed that some records had been destroyed.

Although at least one worker has received a "no fault" compensation payment after developing lymphatic leukaemia, the Government has never admitted responsibility when considering compensation claims.

Mr Spellar's admission, in a *Panorama* programme to be broadcast this evening, heralds a new era of sympathy to the workers' complaints.

"I think in the main they [safety standards] were adhered to. I think that in the very early days there might have been some breaches and therefore we have to acknowledge that," Mr Spellar told the programme. "A limited number of

workers may have levels of radiation, we've never contradicted that, indeed that's exactly why we look back on individual records in order to try to see what happened in individual cases."

The Government is spending more than £1 million on updating the database of medical records for former dockyard workers.

"For most of the regular workers we do have well-established records and in some cases there are some gaps. What we're doing is putting all of these on a database so that we're completely aware, where possible, of people's records."

"There were some of those who came in irregularly and frankly those records disappeared or were destroyed over a period of time – there was

actually no legal requirement to keep them. But we're not complacent about that."

An MoD spokesman said yesterday: "Our standards were never lax and they remain strict. The Ministry of Defence has been bound by detailed statutory regulations and followed the advice of the Radiological Protection Board.

"Our standards have been, and still are, at least equivalent to or more restrictive than those required by law."

There is still widespread dissatisfaction among dockyard workers, who believe the Government is not doing enough for them.

A former Chatham Dockyard worker, Kevin Sansom, told *Panorama*: "Counselling is cheap, it's all talk. I would like to see something like a proper

medical being done, tests being done to convince me that I haven't got it. Once I had all that done, then I can have that peace of mind."

David Hobbs, who worked on the HMS Resolution for 13 years and was involved in refitting a Polaris submarine, told the programme he believed he spent two years drinking what turned out to be radioactive tea from a nuclear reactor compartment.

He has suffered cancer of the spine and the genitalia – often caused by ingested radiation – and is now battling with the MoD for compensation for his "ruined life".

But his struggle is made harder by the loss of 40 per cent of his medical records. He said: "I am disgusted with the MoD. I believe that loyalty should work both ways."