

Subject: Nuclear Pills Disputed

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Easily made and costing only pennies, potassium iodide pills can prevent thyroid cancer in people exposed to radiation. But the government has made no effort to stockpile them at nuclear plants despite a presidential commission's recommendation.

The industry says stockpiling the pills would be impractical. Critics say the industry is just scared of bad publicity. Federal regulators have said a large-scale effort "would not be worthwhile" -- but they're about to take another look.

In the 16 years since the Three Mile Island accident, there has been dispute among nuclear safety officials, the nuclear industry, scientists, health experts and government bureaucrats over whether the government should stockpile the pills in the event of a major release of radiation.

The thyroid, a gland in the neck that secretes a hormone regulating body growth and metabolism, is highly susceptible to radiation. A modest dose of potassium iodide saturates the thyroid and blocks the radioactive iodine, protecting against cancer and other illnesses, medical experts say. For full effect, it must be

taken within hours of radiation exposure, said Dr. David Becker, a professor of radiology and medicine at Cornell Medical Center and an official of the American Thyroid Association.

Although the federal government does not require the nation's 72 nuclear power plants stockpile potassium iodide, three states -- Tennessee, Alabama and Arizona -- have decided to store the pills in counties near nuclear power plants.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Federal Emergency Management Agency say now that they will review the federal policy, based on a 1985 finding that stockpiling potassium iodide for the public in case of a nuclear accident "would not be worthwhile." The policy does, however, favor having the drug on hand to protect emergency workers.

"The NRC's position seems to be that since it's unlikely to have an accident, therefore it's an unnecessary expense" to keep the drug on hand, Becker said. The American Thyroid Association has pressed the NRC to recommend stockpiling the drug.

The nuclear industry has been adamant in its opposition.

"We don't believe there would be any health benefit because you would not get this material to people in a timely manner," says John Schmitt, a director for emergency preparedness at the Nuclear Energy Institute, the nuclear industry trade group.

In a letter to the NRC two years ago, the industry cited "substantial cost impacts" of stockpiling. And it worried that stockpiling would "result in a potentially significant negative public perception" and in the event of an accident cause confusion about whether to evacuate or seek shelter.

Last year, the NRC for the second time rejected a recommendation to stockpile, although this time its own staff concluded that it would be "prudent" and would cost less than 10 cents a year for each of the nearly 800,000 people who might be protected.

Kenneth Rogers, one of two commissioners to vote in favor of the recommendation, said it is "a question of prudence" and a way to ensure that manufacturers produce adequate supplies.

Supporters believe the industry is concerned that a decision to stockpile the pills will raise doubts about the safety of nuclear reactors.

Indeed, an industry study on potassium iodide -- written in 1993, but still cited by spokesmen today, argues that if the federal government directs -- or even recommends -- stockpiling the drug, "members of the public will want to know if the federal policy is being changed because the (nuclear) plants are less safe."

Peter Crane, an NRC attorney who has privately opposed the industry and NRC positions since the early 1980s, filed a formal petition, as a private citizen, calling on the agency to recommend

stockpiling.

"You could protect everyone within five miles of every nuclear power plant for several hundred thousand dollars a year," he said.

In Alabama, the utilities agreed to shoulder the cost. It hasn't created problems for us," says Kirk Whatley, director of the state's division of radiation control.

One of those utilities, the Tennessee Valley Authority, spends about \$8,000 a year for the pills, which are kept at county health centers near TVA reactors. When the drug deteriorates, it is donated to aquariums as shark food.

Potassium iodide had been used for decades for a variety of purposes -- from an ingredient in cough medicine to the making of photographic film -- before the Food and Drug Administration approved it as a thyroid radiation blocker in 1978.

A year later, with the Three Mile Island nuclear emergency, federal officials and private drug companies scurried about for days looking for the drug. Although the drug was never needed at Three Mile Island, the mad scramble prompted the Kemeny Commission, which was appointed by President Carter to investigate the accident, to urge regional stockpiling of the pills.

In the early 1980s, the government set aside funds to buy the drug, but then the nuclear industry stepped up its opposition and the NRC staff began arguing that stockpiling was not worth the expense.

A 1983 meeting stands out in Crane's memory since at the time he was undergoing treatment for thyroid cancer stemming from medical exposure to radiation as a child.

Three NRC briefers told the commission that it would be cheaper to take a chance of an accident and rely on medical treatment of the thyroid afterward for those people exposed.

"It's a relatively simple (surgical) operation," said one breifer, according to a transcript cited in Crane's petition. Within two years, the NRC abandoned plans to stockpile the drug.

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