

# MoD offers medical counselling to Chatham radiation victims

in cell 6/97

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**T**HOUSANDS of former Chatham dockyard workers who may have been exposed to nuclear radiation while refitting Royal Navy submarines are to be offered medical counselling under a scheme announced today by the Ministry of Defence and Rochester city council.

Labour MP Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford) welcomed the scheme, but warned that many of his constituents would be looking for a lot more than counselling.

Melanie Nicholson, whose first husband David Spriggs died two years ago at the age of 38 from a virulent cancer he attributed to an accident aboard the nuclear-powered submarine HMS Dreadnought, is taking the MoD to the High Court.

She hopes to obtain records on which to base a claim for compensation. Others are expected to follow.

Mr Shaw said yesterday he knew of more than 100 people who were very keen to take advantage of the health counselling — an extension of a scheme already operated in other parts of the country.

But, after discussions with ministers, he also hoped the MoD would release more of the crucial information about what happened in the nuclear dockyard before its closure in 1984.

Mrs Nicholson acknowledged that, for those seeking expert medical advice, the scheme would be useful. For many others, like her late husband, the offer came too late. "It's a step in the right



Melanie Nicholson: law suit

## Cancer at the dockyard

**W**HEN David Spriggs found he had cancer, he immediately attributed it to "that nuclear thing", writes David Fairhall.

Mr Spriggs, an engine fitter in the reactor compartments of nuclear-powered submarines, was referring to an accident in which he was doused with radioactive water from a burst pipe. Before he died in February 1995 aged 38, four months after contracting cancer of the spine, he asked his wife, now Melanie Nicholson, to pursue the Ministry of Defence, at least for a full explanation. He felt that many others

might also be at risk, perhaps even their children Emma, aged 15, and David, nine. "That's why I've pursued it for him and for the children," says Melanie.

After her first approaches to the MoD had been diverted, she took her campaign to the High Court to obtain her husband's radiation dose records, without which a claim for compensation is almost impossible. The records have either been destroyed or are missing.

She is now preparing further legal action to obtain HMS Dreadnought's accident records.

direction," she said, "but there's still a long way to go."

Her solicitor, Ian Baker, of Guy Clapham and Co, said that having waited six weeks for a response from the Treasury Solicitor to his client's request for the accident records from HMS Dreadnought, she would now try to obtain them through the High Court.

He said it was time the MoD came clean about the radiation risks faced by dockyard workers like Mr Spriggs. Nor was it right for the MoD to avoid responsibility by passing such cases on to the Government's "no-fault" compensation scheme, set up four years ago after another submarine fitter, Rudy Molinari, received £163,000 in a test case against the MoD after contracting leukaemia he attributed to radiation exposure. More than 2,000 people

were involved in radiation work on nuclear-powered submarines at Chatham between 1966 and 1982.

Among them was the Mayor of Rochester Linda Robson's husband Tim, who died of cancer two years ago at the age of 39, and who was unable to obtain compensation under the existing rules.

Mrs Robson has continued her late husband's campaign for recognition of the dockyard workers' health problems.

For the MoD's lawyers, already under fire over sexual and racial discrimination in the armed forces, it looks like setting important and expensive precedents.