

# BMA wants talks on emergency planning for radioactive leaks

Paul Brown and  
Guy Heath

The British Medical Association is to ask for an overhaul of procedures for dealing with nuclear leaks from power stations after discovering that police rather than the medical profession are in charge of storing and distributing anti-radiation tablets.

The BMA said yesterday it was not consulted about emergency plans and would be asking the Home Office and the Department of Health for an explanation.

A circular has been sent by the Department of Health to general practitioners with sur-

geries near to nuclear installations telling them how to deal with patients worried in the event of a nuclear accident.

A Central Electricity Generating Board spokesman said that contingency plans had been published 16 years ago and lodged in local libraries. The new circular was just to get GPs up to date.

The plans involve storing thousands of potassium iodate tablets at police stations near power stations. The tablets are a natural substance which is said to provide resistance against the lethal radioactive isotope iodine 131 which causes thyroid cancer.

A BMA spokesman said that

doctors rather than policemen should be responsible for the storage of medicines and their distribution to the public. It seemed reasonable that it should be the responsibility of police surgeons who were used to police procedures and already had close contacts with local forces.

Mr Dafydd Ellis Thomas, the Plaid Cymru MP, who was told of the existence of thousands of tablets at police stations near the Trawsfynydd nuclear power station during a visit yesterday said that distribution and storage should be handled by the health authorities rather than the police.

A North Wales police spokesman said its role was to act as a tablet storage agency for the CEBG.

The CEBG said that emergency plans had been laid when the power stations had come into operation many years ago and had been disclosed to the local liaison committees at the time.

The tablets would not be issued unless an evacuation of the area had also been ordered. The police would be in charge of the evacuation and it was because of this that the responsibility of distributing the tablets had also been given to them.

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Sir, — All GPs working within 40 miles of nuclear power stations were sent a circular last month from the National Radiological Protection Board entitled Advice for General Practitioners in the Event of a Civil Nuclear Emergency.

Since one of the main components of a leak is likely to be Iodine 131, the document proposes the giving of a flushing dose of potassium iodate to those likely to have been exposed to contamination, most effectively within two hours of exposure. The measure is intended to minimise the risk of later thyroid cancer; according to the Central Electricity Generating Board's own calculations the 1957 Windscale fire, which released a plume of radio iodine across Cumbria, will probably be responsible for 260 cases of thyroid cancer over the 40 years to 1997.

The NRPB's contingency plans suggest that the emergency team would assess the extent of contamination, then decide whether to issue iodate pills to those exposed, and ask the police to distribute them.

But the circular offers conflicting advice; those in affected areas should stay indoors with the windows

closed, but they may need to go to the police station for pills. Even assuming that people had transport instantly available, centralised distribution points would mean large numbers of people exposed to contaminated air.

The police would be unable to undertake door-to-door distribution — except on a small scale — within the required time.

In most cases administration of the pill within the four to six hours (maximum) would entail people keeping iodate doses at home, to be taken if so advised over radio or television.

As long as the hazards are there, we should have a wider debate about public safety measures. It does appear that the NRPB is far too closely tied to the nuclear industry impartially to protect the public health. In its recent report on the 1957 Windscale fire, it omitted any mention of the presence of polonium in the contamination, later admitted that this was because it was there for military purposes.

Independent monitoring of the safety of nuclear installations should be carried out by the NHS. — Yours,

(Dr) A. J. M. Coates.  
Coleford, Gloucestershire.

## Nuclear fall-out pills stored by police 6/9/85

ANTI-radiation pills are being secretly stored in police stations in case of nuclear fall-out from power stations, it has been disclosed.

Tens of thousands of potassium iodate pills are held at police stations near nine nuclear power stations in England and Wales. Doctors have been told to send patients there. Policemen will distribute the pills.

They provide resistance to the lethal radio-active isotope Iodine 131, which causes thyroid cancer.

The secret pill storage was revealed in a circular from the National Radiological Protection Board, telling doctors how to deal with panic-stricken patients.

The pills are paid for and distributed by the Central Electricity Generating Board.

A spokesman said: "Pills have to be distributed from somewhere and police stations seem the most useful places. In the case of evacuation it would be the police who took charge, and not doctors."

"Iodine 131 has a very short life. It would be dispersed before it had travelled one-and-a-half miles.

"The danger period is only about two hours but we have to distribute these pills as a safeguard."

In Scotland there are two nuclear power plants, at Hunterston, Ayrshire, and one nearing completion at Torness, East Lothian.

Two lobster fishermen have had radiation checks after hauling aboard the end section of a discharge pipe from the Dounreay plant in Caithness. George King, 37, and James Bremner, 34, from Scrabster were found to be well within recognised safety levels. They agreed to provide samples of lobsters caught near the pipe for analysis by the Ministry of Agriculture.