

## **Rochester, Radiation, and Repression**

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"I feel a sense of closure," said Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary as she announced a recent settlement awarding \$4.8 million to the families of 12 patients injected with radioactive substances in experiments sponsored by the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The legal agreement absolves the federal government of blame. In the October 24, 1996 Times-Union, Gerald Mousso, whose uncle was injected with plutonium at the University of Rochester (UR) in 1946, comments: "I guess the government really won. All the culprits that planned and executed this thing got away with it."

Altogether, about 16,000 people were subjects in radiation experiments that Congressman Edward Markey of Massachusetts calls "a gruesome testament to the nuclear naivete and paranoia" of the Cold War. Eleven of the eighteen plutonium injection experiments on human subjects in the 1940s were done at UR. Among other things, the experiments led to the momentous discovery that humans excrete plutonium more slowly than rats. In other UR experiments during that decade, six patients had uranium salts injected into their kidneys to determine how it would affect their renal function; and five other patients were injected with polonium, another radioactive substance, to see how it was metabolized and excreted.

In one of her Pulitzer Prize-winning articles on the plutonium experiments, Eileen Welsome explains: "Plutonium emits from its nucleus an extremely high-energy alpha particle, which is composed of two protons and two neutrons... The energy is called ionizing radiation, a process in which negatively charged electrons are separated from their neutral atoms... Once an electron is knocked out of orbit, it careens great distances, breaking the intricate latticework of chemical bonds in the body and producing new chemical reactions, especially in cell nuclei... The first alpha particle or the hundred-millionth could be the one that causes the crucial mutation that leads to cancer. Thus any amount of plutonium, however small, can potentially cause cancer... Cell culture experiments suggest that exposure to alpha particles can lead to chromosomal instability that could affect future generations."

Most of the plutonium in human bodies comes, of course, not from university experiments but from deliberate releases of the substance into the air. Atmospheric atom bomb tests ended in 1962. However, thousands of pounds of plutonium radionuclides had been released by then. John Gofman, an expert on the dangers of radiation, estimates that close to a million lung-cancer deaths will result from plutonium fallout, and that the resultant disruption of genes and chromosomes will cause such diseases as heart disease and schizophrenia.

As for the plutonium medical experiments, the UR administration denies responsibility for them because they were, in the words of UR Medical Center spokesperson Robert Loeb, "government-created and government-funded." This attribution of sole responsibility to the government ignores the "circulation of elites" between government, corporations, and universities, particularly at UR which was built in the shadow of Kodak and the national security state. Loeb claims that UR neither knew of nor approved the plutonium experiments, which he describes as a

"covert extracurricular activity." This notion, that UR doctors acted without the approval of administrators, contradicts what is known about the experiments.

As William Neumann, a former UR Radiation Biology Department chair, recalls in a 1975 UR Medical Center publication titled *To Each His Farthest Star*, the AEC experiments came to UR in 1943 when Dr. Albert K. Chapman, the vice president of Eastman Kodak, introduced Dr. Stafford Warren, the UR chief of radiology who later devised the single plutonium injection experiments, to high-ranking military officers in the Manhattan District, the program later known as the Manhattan Project. The officers questioned Dr. Warren on his experience with radiation, after which "...Dr. Chapman left, after advising Dr. Warren to do whatever the officers requested. Then, according to Dr. Warren's account, the officers took him to a private room where after locking the door, closing the transom, and examining a closet, they asked him if he would consider working on a medical program of great importance to the government but which involved the utmost secrecy. Following consultation with [UR] President Valentine and Dean Whipple on March 2, 1943, Dr. Warren accepted an appointment as civilian consultant to the Manhattan District."

UR officials maintain that because the radiation experiments were conducted long ago, they are not representative of research at UR. In an interview, former UR President Robert Sproull relegated the experiments to a past where unpleasantness just tended to happen: "Things were done then during the war that would not be done at all now. You don't use the word 'nigger' now at all. But if you uncovered something 50 years old and somebody used the word 'nigger,' it would sound as if he was a terrible person. So it was done in a different society, a different world, really."

Despite Sproull's assurances about the difference between then and now, UR has always valued profitable research over human well-being. According to the *Occupational Safety and Health Reporter*, "In 1967, researchers at the University of Rochester examined the uptake and retention of lead in red blood cells of three subjects who were fed lead, and compared excretion rates of lead between subjects who were given lead by mouth and those given it intravenously." Last spring, UR sophomore Nicole Wan died in a university medical experiment, despite warnings from the Food and Drug Administration, just months prior to Wan's death, that UR's failure to follow proper experiment procedures placed human subjects at risk. Around the same time, UR's involvement in the Westfall Health Facility, where a comatose woman was raped and impregnated, became public knowledge. Lately, controversy has erupted at UR over the presence of Dr. Ron Wood, a researcher whose experiments involve feeding crack to monkeys. Wood left NYU a few years ago, after the U.S. Department of Agriculture fined the university for 378 violations of the Animal Welfare Act which took place at Wood's laboratory.

These scandals accompany UR's move toward profitable research and corporatized medicine. Just a few years ago, President Clinton touted Rochester as a model for national health insurance. Today, this model is a fading memory. Powerful corporate interests are corrupting medicine and education at UR and elsewhere in Rochester.

In his 1991 speech at UR announcing the shifting of Pentagon money from federal laboratories to universities, Allen Bromley, science advisor to George Bush, warned of the dangers that

would befall "a nation that draws too sharp a distinction between its scholars and its warriors." The distinction is lost on UR's corporate trustees who can not even distinguish their own business interests from the needs of the university.

The plutonium experiments and other medical scandals have provoked little discussion or soul-searching at UR, where institutional silence and repression continue to prevail over the voices of memory. What the university needs is not the closure that Hazel O'Leary and UR officials want, but a thawing of the glacial numbness and amnesia that afflicts its professors, doctors, and students alike.