

Reasonable doubt

Once again there are fears that living close to a nuclear plant raises children's risk of leukaemia. Let's take them more seriously this time around, says **Ian Fairlie**

AMONG the many environmental concerns surrounding nuclear power plants, there is one that provokes public anxiety like no other: the fear that children living near nuclear facilities face an increased risk of cancer. Though a link has long been suspected, it has never been proven. Now that seems likely to change.

Studies in the 1980s revealed increased incidences of childhood leukaemia near nuclear installations at Windscale (now Sellafield), Burghfield and Dounreay in the UK. Later studies near German nuclear facilities found a similar effect. The official response was that the radiation doses from the nearby plants were too low to explain the increased leukaemia. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment, which is responsible for advising the UK government, finally concluded that the explanation remained unknown but was not likely to be radiation.

There the issue rested, until a recent flurry of epidemiological studies appeared. Last year, researchers at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston carried out a meta-analysis of 17 research papers covering 136 nuclear sites in the UK, Canada, France, the US, Germany, Japan and Spain. The incidence of leukaemia in children under 9 living close to the sites showed an increase of 14 to 21 per cent, while death rates from the disease were raised by 5 to 24 per cent, depending on their proximity to the nuclear facilities (*European Journal of Cancer Care*, vol 16, p 355).

This was followed by a German study which found 14 cases of leukaemia compared to an expected four cases between 1990 and 2005 in children living within 5 kilometres of the Krümmel nuclear plant near Hamburg, making it the largest leukaemia cluster near a nuclear power plant anywhere in the world (*Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol 115, p 941).

This was upstaged by the yet more surprising KiKK studies (a German

acronym for Childhood Cancer in the Vicinity of Nuclear Power Plants), whose results were published this year in the *International Journal of Cancer* (vol 122, p 721) and the *European Journal of Cancer* (vol 44, p 275). These found higher incidences of cancers and a stronger association with nuclear installations than all previous reports. The main findings were a 60 per cent increase in solid cancers and a 117 per cent increase in leukaemia among young children living near all 16 large German nuclear facilities between 1980 and 2003. The most striking finding was that those who developed cancer lived closer to nuclear power plants than randomly selected controls. Children living within 5 kilometres of the plants were more than twice as likely to contract cancer as those living further away, a finding that has been accepted by the German government.

Though the KiKK studies received scant attention elsewhere, there was a public outcry and vocal media debate in Germany. No one is sure of the cause

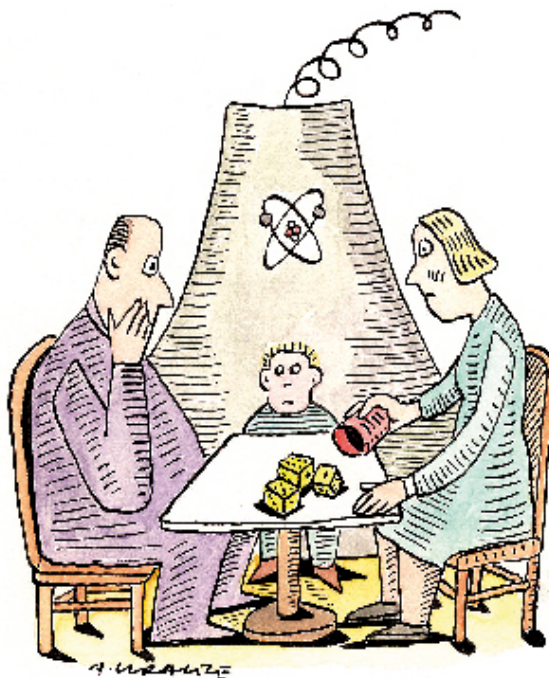
(or causes) of the extra cancers. Coincidence has been ruled out, as has the "Kinlen hypothesis", which theorises that childhood leukaemia is caused by an unknown infectious agent introduced as a result of an influx of new people to the area concerned. Surprisingly, the most obvious explanation for this increased risk – radioactive discharges from the nearby nuclear installations – was also ruled out by the KiKK researchers, who asserted that the radiation doses from such sources were too low, although the evidence they base this on is not clear.

Anyone who followed the argument in the 1980s and 1990s concerning the UK leukaemia clusters will have a sense of déjà vu. A report in 2004 by the Committee Examining Radiation Risks of Internal Emitters, set up by the UK government (and for which I was a member of the secretariat) points out that the models used to estimate radiation doses from sources emitted from nuclear facilities are riddled with uncertainty. For example, assumptions about how radioactive material is transported through the environment or taken up and retained by local residents may be faulty.

If radiation is indeed the cause of the cancers, how might local residents have been exposed? Most of the reactors in the KiKK study were pressurised water designs notable for their high emissions of tritium, the radioactive isotope of hydrogen. Last year, the UK government published a report on tritium which concluded that its hazard risk should be doubled. Tritium is most commonly found incorporated into water molecules, a factor not fully taken into account in the report, so this could make it even more hazardous.

As we begin to pin down the likely causes, the new evidence of an association between increased cancers and proximity to nuclear facilities raises difficult questions. Should pregnant women and young children be advised to move away from them? Should local residents eat vegetables from their gardens? And, crucially, shouldn't those governments around the world who are planning to build more reactors think again? ●

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