



## Chernobyl's Real Victims...

By Dr. Roger Bate

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The [UN Development Programme](#) and [Unicef](#) have finally admitted in a new report what many scientists and policy wonks have known for years. Chernobyl killed thousands -- not from radiation, but from policy based on radiophobic hysteria. (Editor's note: The two organizations have yet to make the report available on their websites.)

The exhibitions of photographs of deformed victims, which raised millions of dollars for pressure groups and charities, have been exposed as fraudulent. However, it is unlikely that anti-nuclear activists will acknowledge their culpability in the deaths they have caused since it would undermine their entire thesis that low-level radiation is harmful. It is, in fact, entirely harmless

In the nearly 15 years since the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe thousands of people have died and hundreds of thousands of births affected by its fallout. But the deaths are due to radiophobia, which caused extensive political fallout, and not from radiation-induced illness. According to UN scientists looking at the medical effects of Chernobyl, the real disaster has been psychosomatic disorders that were exacerbated by the mass media hysteria at the time. This hysteria encouraged inappropriate government actions in the former Soviet Union such as forced evacuations from locations that might have been contaminated with radiation. (For a related article describing the potential consequences of this hysteria in the U.S., [click HERE.](#))

The nuclear core meltdown that occurred at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union in April 1986 was a tragedy for the hundreds of people actually working at the plant. Of these about one third (134 people) were diagnosed with acute radiation sickness, and 28 of these died within the first four months of the accident. Since then, 17 more of the patients who survived the acute phase have died. These later deaths were caused by lung gangrene, thigh sarcoma, and non-radiation diseases or accidents. For them and their families, Chernobyl was a disaster. But for many others it didn't have to be.

Partly because the international media were denied access to the site -- but also because of acute radiophobia that has gripped western thought since the World War II atomic bombing of Japan -- western media assumed the worst. The British *Daily Mail* on April 29th 1986 filled half its front page with the words "2000 DEAD." They further claimed that the dead were not buried in cemeteries but at "Pirogovo in the radioactive wastes depository."

The next day, The *New York Post* claimed that 15,000 bodies had been bulldozed into nuclear waste pits. Later, the Natural Resources Defence Council claimed there would be 110,000 post-Chernobyl cancers in Central Europe and Scandinavia. Several years later, on October 13, 1995, Reuters announced "800,000 children were hit by Chernobyl, as in a nuclear attack." Over the following months, the BBC, Greenpeace and the numerous European dailies joined the bandwagon to claim that tens of thousands were dead or dying because of radiation.

According to Professor Zbigniew Jaworowski, a medical adviser to the UN on the effects of radiation "perhaps the most important factor in creating the Chernobyl mythology was the assumption that any radiation dose, even one close to zero, has some detrimental effect." Jaworowski has been arguing this point for nearly a

decade, and finally the UN is beginning to listen. This assumption, on which the world's regulations are based, is called the "linear no-threshold hypothesis." This means that there is no threshold below, which the effects of radiation, which are observed at high doses, cease to appear.

This hypothesis contradicts all experimental and epidemiological evidence. That evidence demonstrates no harm -- and even some benefit -- at low radiation doses. Our bodies can obviously deal with a low level of exposure to radiation, and it may even stimulate our systems' defences and make us healthier. The LNT hypothesis is similar to assuming that one should fear a temperature of 75 Fahrenheit because at 750 Fahrenheit one would receive fatal burns. There are numerous places on the planet (Norway, Iran and even Cornwall in Britain) where natural radiation is far higher than occurred within a few miles from Chernobyl after the meltdown, with no known human harm.

Following the accident there was a small increase in radiation levels in Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus. Massive radiation screening programmes were established in these regions and in other countries such as Poland. Incidents of thyroid cancers (the form of cancer most likely following acute exposure to radiation) had not increased until 1996. Indeed the Brestoblast region of Belarus, the area with the second lowest radiation level, had the highest incidents of thyroid cancer. There has been an excess of 1,800 cases of childhood thyroid cancer in the whole of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, according to the recent report, but even this may be partly due to previous under-reporting.

According to a Swedish radiobiologist, Professor Gunnar Walinder, the LNT hypothesis, and not radiation, is the real health hazard. The belief that any exposure may be harmful leads to disproportionate policies to remove people from this hypothetical danger. Jaworowski estimates that nearly 5 million people in the former Soviet Union have been affected by severe psychological stress, leading to psychosomatic diseases. The main stress was inflicted on those living in areas where the media and Government informed them that it was fatal to live. Forced evacuations of the 850,000 newly categorized "Chernobyl victims" was planned. In the end, 400,000 people were forced to move. Many of these people suffered from gastrointestinal, endocrinological and other non-radiation induced problems. Relocation occurred for over 5 years, causing the destruction of family and community social networks, and according to Jaworowski "exposed the relocated persons to resentment and ostracism in the new localities, where old inhabitants treated them as privileged intruders." Relocation started with those exposed to most radiation (levels about the sixth the background level in Iran), but soon people exposed to doses of radiation lower than in Cornwall were being moved.

Among those moved, morbidity and mortality rates were far higher than those who stayed behind. And the cost of the process ran into billions of dollars. One estimate endorsed by Jaworowski puts the cost to Belarus at \$86 billion. Perhaps saddest of all is that as many as 200,000 abortions were conducted of wanted pregnancies in order to avoid non-existent radiation damage to the fetus.

The end result of government action, activist pressure and media campaigns has been the spawning of a victim culture, where half of the Ukraine says their health has been adversely affected by Chernobyl.

Apportioning blame between the media and the Supreme Soviet is a difficult task. But unfounded western fears based on the linear no-threshold hypothesis undoubtedly encouraged the mass evacuation program undertaken by the Soviet authorities.

Chernobyl was the worst possible meltdown of a poorly designed, constructed and managed nuclear reactor, with the release of significant quantities of radionuclides into the atmosphere. Yet, according to the UN Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, the death toll from the accident itself and directly

related effects is 41. There were no early death cases among the public. Apart from increase in thyroid cancer registry (probably due to increased screening rather than a real increase in incidence) there is no evidence of a major public health impact related to the ionizing radiation 15 years after the accident. No increase of overall cancer incidence or mortality that could be associated with radiation exposure has been observed. Many more deaths were induced by poor policies based on outdated scientific understanding. And yet today the LNT hypothesis still forms the basis of radiation thinking.

This is a bizarre indictment of the anti-nuclear world we inhabit. Let us hope that the recent UN report will begin to change this perception. But don't hold your breath.

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