

Health Hazards of Nuclear Arms Plants: PSR Forum at Stony Brook

To what extent does the production of nuclear weapons pose a health threat? This question was addressed at a public forum on March 31, sponsored by Nassau and Suffolk PSR chapters. The meeting was held at the Health Science Center of SUNY Stony Brook and was moderated by Dr. Jordan Cohen, dean of the medical school.

Three eminent speakers from varying backgrounds contributed their expertise to the discussion. Dr. David Parkinson, professor of community medicine at the medical school, enumerated many instances of flagrant disregard for public health, occupational safety and the environment in the mismanagement of hazardous materials. His own experience showed that in many industries, workers concerned about hazards received no cooperation from management.

Dr. Jack Geiger, representing PSR, called for the immediate creation of a national review commission on nuclear weapons production and public health to assess the consequences of the Department of Energy's operation of the entire U.S. nuclear weapons industry. It would be composed of health and environmental

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authorities who have no conflict of interest with the DOE. Congressman Tom Downey contributed his political point of view to the discussion. He characterized the changes wrought by Gorbachev and his program of perestroika as being irreversible, and bound to favorably affect U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union for the foreseeable future. He called for grasping this opportunity by

responding to Soviet disarmament moves with some substantial U.S. reductions.

In expanding on his call for an independent review board, Dr. Geiger held that until the evaluation is completed, the DOE should be prohibited from restarting any of its reactors at Savannah River and from reopening the facilities presently closed at Rocky Flats, Fernald, Hanford

PSR calls for independent review board

and other installations. "From the point of view of medicine and public health," said Dr. Geiger, "it is appalling that no authority, not even the DOE itself, knows the exact profiles of the massive accumulations of waste at many DOE facilities. Yet such information is essential to both preventive action and to epidemiological studies." Such studies, he said, must begin immediately.

Dr. Geiger went on to say that the DOE should be required to make the pooled occupational health and radiation exposure records of its entire labor force of nearly 300,000 workers available to all qualified independent medical investigators. "Until now," he said, "it has resisted such requests, making partial information available only to its own researchers and a few other scientists." "The DOE has a profound conflict of interest," he said, "between meeting nuclear weapons production schedules on the one hand, and ensuring the health and safety of its employees and the public on the other. The evidence that has come to light makes it clear that DOE has historically chosen to resolve that conflict in favor of production, with potentially catastrophic results."