



HEALTH
PHYSICS
SOCIETY

WHAT ABOUT "DEADLY PLUTONIUM"?

POSITION STATEMENT OF THE HEALTH PHYSICS SOCIETY*

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Whenever plutonium is mentioned in a news story, it seems invariably to be preceded by the adjective "deadly". In case that isn't considered sensational enough, other statements are often included, e.g., "the most deadly element known" or "a single speck of plutonium inhaled can kill a person." In articles that are otherwise generally factual, such a misleading statement of opinion is often included in a way that implies it to be one of the facts of the story. This is the kind of misinformation that reporters apparently include simply to dramatize the story.

The Health Physics Society¹ believes that such inaccurate statements by the news media are at least partially responsible for much of the public anxiety and fear over issues related to radiation. The fact is that there are many people who have inhaled measurable quantities of plutonium many years ago and have suffered no ill effects. The radiological hazards of plutonium are of the same types and magnitudes as those of such naturally occurring radioactive elements as radium and thorium, which are now and always have been present in the food we eat, in the water we drink, and in trace amounts in our bodies. However, the potential for public exposure to plutonium is negligible compared with thorium, which is found everywhere in soil and rock; it is three times as abundant as uranium and about as abundant as lead in the earth's crust. Thorium has many commercial applications, including the manufacture of gas lantern mantles, which are sold to anyone without cause for concern.

As scientists who are professionally responsible for radiation protection of workers and the public, we believe that journalists, wire services and news broadcasters should be completely factual in news stories involving radiation. When it becomes obvious that a story has been distorted, and we know the facts, we become skeptical of your honesty in all stories.

The expertise of the members of the Health Physics Society is always readily available for providing factual information about radiation and concomitant health risks. Please feel free to call on us at any time.

* The Health Physics Society is a non profit scientific professional organization whose mission is to promote the practice of radiation safety. Since its formation in 1956, the Society has grown to approximately 6,000 scientists, physicians, engineers, lawyers, and other professionals representing academia, industry, government, national laboratories, the department of defense, and other organizations. Society activities include encouraging research in radiation science, developing standards, and disseminating radiation safety information. Society members are involved in understanding, evaluating, and controlling the potential risks from radiation relative to the benefits. Official position statements are prepared and adopted in accordance with standard policies and procedures of the Society. The Society may be contacted at: 1313 Dolley Madison Blvd., Suite 402, McLean, VA 22101; phone: 703-790-1745; FAX: 703-790-2672; email: HPS@BurkInc.com.