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IBM fights to suppress cancer probe

Computer giant accused of persuading scientific journal to block academic investigation of illness in employees

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Scientists have voted to boycott an international journal after its owners blocked publication of a paper claiming large numbers of IBM workers have died prematurely of cancers and other diseases.

The development is unprecedented and has triggered a battle between the computer company and researchers. IBM says the paper is flawed but denies putting pressure on the publishing group Elsevier to stop the paper's publication.

Dr Joe LaDou, of the University of California at San Francisco, who tried to publish the paper, said the study was an important work that reveals the serious health risks facing workers in the computing industry. He has bitterly attacked the decision to block the paper and has been backed by all other contributors to Clinics in Occupational and Environmental Medicine. They have demanded that all their papers for that issue be withdrawn until the publisher relents.

'By standing together we can bring attention to the heavy-handed tactics that industry employs to prevent the publication of important scientific discovery,' he said.

The health problems of workers in the semiconductor industry, whose labours spawned the computer revolution and the industrial rebirth of the United States in the Seventies and Eighties, have become a major headache for computer hardware companies in recent years. Hundreds of former employees are suing silicon-chip makers and computer manufacturers over the diseases they have suffered after working with acids and solvents in fabrication plants. IBM is now facing litigation from more than 250 former employees.

Cases include Nancy LaCroix, who worked at IBM's Essex Junction plant in Vermont, where, she claims, she was surrounded by chemical fumes. She gave birth five years ago to a daughter who has severe bone defects, including encephalocele, a condition in which a portion of the brain sticks out through her skull.

Another worker, Heather Curtis, worked with chemicals at IBM while she was pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, Candice, with microcephaly, a severe brain abnormality. Suzanne Rubio developed cancer that spread through her body and died aged 36 in 1991. Her lawyers blame her death on the 'witch's brew' of chemicals she had to work with.

The company strongly denies these workers contracted their health problems through factors related to their work. In a workforce as large as IBM's, many workers will, by simple chance, contract unusual diseases, officials have insisted.

Last year, hearings for two cases - Alida Hernandez, 73, a cancer victim; and James Moore, 62, who suffers from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of lymph tissue - began in Santa Clara County, California. Their lawyers asked for access to IBM's employee mortality records. These requests were initially refused by the company but following a court order, the records were handed over. IBM maintains they contain no helpful data.

But distinguished epidemiologist Richard Clapp, of Boston University, and his colleague Rebecca Johnson were

asked to examine the records. Their analysis showed IBM employees suffered significantly more deaths from several kinds of cancer than would be expected from the general population. This trend was particularly strong for workers at IBM's chip-manufacturing plants, the current issue of Nature reveals.

'We found that cases of brain and kidney cancers and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma were more than double that found in the population at large,' Dr Clapp said.

This study was requested by LaDou, who was acting as guest editor for a special issue of Clinics concentrating on health issues in the electronics industry. IBM claimed the data was confidential but lawyers said the paper was a public document. LaDou sent it off for publication. 'I got an email back very quickly, telling me that the paper was not suitable for publication,' he said.

Elsevier says the study is a research paper and only review papers are accepted. LaDou described this claim as 'nonsense'. Elsevier also denied it had been pressed by any outside company or party into pulling the paper, and claimed it was hoping to work with the journal's contributors to try to find an alternative journal for Clapp's paper - though not necessarily one owned by the company.

In the cases of Hernandez and Moore, his study had little effect. The judge refused permission for it to be presented and the two plaintiffs lost their case earlier this year. However, since then IBM has settled out of court with Candice Curtis for an undisclosed sum.

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