France: nuclear industry subcontractors still at risk

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The IARC study reports only 1 to 2% of cancer deaths among nuclear industry workers from exposure to low doses of ionizing radiation. Isn't this good news?

Many exposed workers in the nuclear industry were excluded from the cohort for the French part of the study because they work for sub-contractors. The French cohort consists exclusively of Electricité de France (EDF) and Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique (French nuclear research agency – CEA) employees. But for the past twenty-odd years, 80% of the doses in the nuclear power industry have been received by subcontractors. So the French cohort comprises only the least exposed workers.

I also see a bit of spin on the way the overall results for the 15 countries covered are presented. The Euratom Directive refers to ICRP 60[1] to set the standards in force in the European Union. ICRP 60 assesses the risk of death from cancer at between 4 and 5% for 1 000 mSv, which amounts to exposure to a dose of 20 mSv/year over 50 years. But the IARC study gives a finding of 1 to 2% for 100 mSv, i.e., for a total exposure one-tenth of that. As ICRP 60 recognises a linear effect, the conclusion has to be that 1 to 2% for 100 mSv equates to a risk of 10 to 20% for 1 000 mSv. That is obviously a whole different ball-game.

How can the interpretations of these figures be so different?

The ICRP studies assessing the cancer death risk at 4 to 5% have so far been based on the epidemiological studies done on survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb blasts, i.e., populations exposed to high dose ionizing radiation, whereas the IARC study evaluates the risk based on observations of workers who all received low doses. The CGT feels that the results of the IARC study therefore more accurately reflect the workplace realities than the ICRP 60 projections, and this is why it wants the current exposure standard of 20 mSv/year to be cut to a third or a quarter of that level, because the risk as estimated by the IARC study is three to four times higher than the ICRP 60 estimates.

What about the situation of outside workers in the French nuclear industry?

There has been some progress over the past decade. The number of employees at or above the dose limit has fallen sharply. On the other hand, the number of employees at the upper level of the standard, between 10 and 15 mSv/year, has risen. A lot still needs to be done to get these figures below the 10 mSv/year mark.

As regards insecure workers, things have changed. In the 1990s, between 20 and 25% of sub-contract firm staff were contingent workers. That figure is now between 15 and 20%. But 50 to 60% of these casual workers are employed on nuclear industry services work (decontamination, lagging and jacketing, scaffolding, cleaning, etc.) where radiation exposure is high. So while average insecure employment is down, the figures are still very high for the most exposed job sites.

In fact, insecure workers – those on temporary and fixed term contracts – are now prevented by French law from working in limited stay and prohibited areas. But this has very little effect because very few people at all do work in these areas. Between 90 and 95% of doses in the nuclear power industry are received in regulated stay areas. And many types of contract that are classed as unlimited term contracts are actually highly insecure. The "new job contract" (CNE – which allows a small employer to hire and dismiss people before they have worked for two years without having to provide grounds for dismissal) is a case in point. Use of so-called "duration of site" contracts is also very widespread. In strict law, these are unlimited term contracts, but in reality these contracts that last just for the duration of a work site are highly insecure. I have personally witnessed employees on supposed unlimited term contracts working for just seven hours before being sent on other jobs… These employees may be working in limited stay areas.

Can you make an "identikit picture" of workers that receive high doses?

They tend to be low- or unskilled employees working for nuclear industry servicing firms. They are "captive" nuclear industry workers, by which I mean that they cannot offer their services on other markets because their employment is tied to nuclear industry activities. The odd times when they are not working on nuclear sites, they are stripping asbestos or cleaning chemical plants because their employers specialise in high-risk work. So they are exposed to a vast range of carcinogens. We are deeply concerned about these workers. A confidential EDF survey has found that 84% of employees working for subcontractors want to get out of the nuclear industry because of poor living and working conditions. ■

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[1] In 1990, the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) completely redefined the radiological protection system recommended in its Publication 60.