

Epidemiology research – Update July 2013

Changes have been made to the way data and research into the health of nuclear industry workers are managed in the UK.

Public Health England (PHE) is now responsible for the management of two NDA-owned databases containing data which can be used in research programmes to investigate the potential health effects of radiation on current and ex-employees at UK civil nuclear sites. These databases ('ex-BNFL' and 'ex-UKAEA') were originally set-up by the former BNFL and the original UKAEA and contain a range of data collated to support the epidemiological studies as described below. This change ensures continued appropriate management of those datasets and will allow studies, if appropriate, to continue as before. No further action is required from workers involved.

Research programmes using health and work-exposure information about workers are one type of epidemiology study. Epidemiology is the investigation of how disease is distributed in populations and factors that might affect this distribution.

The results of such studies are important in ensuring conditions for workers exposed to radiation are kept as safe as possible and that the industry is fully aware of the impact of nuclear operations on its employees.

They typically involve recording data related to radiation exposure, characteristics (e.g. age, gender) that influence health, current vital status and cause of death or cancer incidence. These data are then analysed statistically to investigate possible relationships between causes of death or illness and exposure to radiation.

The NDA radiation epidemiology programme is overseen by a governance group with an independent chair and currently made up of representatives from unions (GMB, Prospect and Unite), the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA), Sellafield Ltd and PHE.

These industry-specific research programmes were launched by BNFL and the UKAEA in the late 1970s. The change in management of this programme has come about as a result of the evolution of the UK nuclear industry over the past two decades.

PHE is an executive agency of the Department of Health, set up by the government in 2013 to protect the public from threats to their health from infectious diseases and environmental hazards. PHE staff (who were previously part of the Health Protection Agency) have considerable experience in managing similar research programmes (e.g. the National Registry for Radiation Workers) and in communicating results to stakeholders.

PHE has recruited new staff and has also opened an office in West Cumbria to support the work. PHE is committed to keeping radiation workers fully informed of the outcomes of existing studies, as was the case previously. Workers will also be notified of any plans for future studies, including details of how to opt-out should individuals not wish to participate. All data are managed safely and securely in line with national and legislative requirements. Workforces will continue to be offered pre-publication briefings on scientific papers that are published using the databases.

The NDA continues to fund both management of the epidemiology programme and relevant research.

Further information can be found on the HPA website (<http://www.hpa.org.uk/web/HPAweb&Page&HPAwebAutoListName/Page/1158934607751>) and a Frequently Asked Questions document has also been produced and can also be found on the HPA website.