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Warns Any Radiation Exposure Is Unsafe

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Topic: [Nuclear Weapons](#), [Safe Energy](#)

Washington, DC - March 19, 2011 – Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) today called for a nationwide moratorium on new nuclear reactors in the United States and a suspension of operations at the nuclear reactors with a similar design as those involved in the disaster in Japan, as well as those on fault lines. PSR cited the medical risks associated with any level of radiation exposure regardless of how small. Lower doses result in less chance of harm than higher doses, but any dose level can put an individual at risk.

“There is no safe level of radiation exposure,” said Jeff Patterson, MD, immediate past president of Physicians for Social Responsibility. “The direction of the wind and the amount of radioactivity released is going to determine the extent of the impact on human health. If the wind changes direction, a large release of radioactivity from the Fukushima reactors would have far-reaching medical consequences in Japan. Medical treatment for radiation is limited, at best.”

“One of the basic tenets of medicine is that if you don’t have a cure for something, you should prevent it from happening in the first place,” said Alan H. Lockwood, MD, a member of the Board of Physicians for Social Responsibility. “The only way to avoid nuclear accidents is to not build nuclear reactors.”

According to the National Academy of Sciences, any exposure to radiation increases a person’s risk of developing cancer. In the case of the Japanese Fukushima reactors, the primary radionuclides of concern are:

- Iodine-131, which causes thyroid cancer when absorbed thru inhalation and ingestion.
- Cesium-137, which when ingested spreads throughout the body. Cesium-137 has the potential to get into the food supply. As a result of Chernobyl, Cesium-137 was taken up by lichen and plants, and animals which consumed those plants became radioactive.
- Strontium-90, which is deposited in bone and teeth where it remains for decades; it causes bone cancer, and leukemia.
- Plutonium-239, which causes lung cancer and remains a severe threat for thousands of years.

Medical treatment for radiation exposure is limited, at best. Iodine pills provide only limited protection against the absorption of Iodine-131, and this is only one of several of the radioactive isotopes that are released during an accident. It must be taken consistently and prior to exposure. In addition, iodine can cause serious health problems if not taken properly and therefore it is not recommended unless there is imminent threat of acute exposure.

The public health risk from a large radioactive release from U.S. reactors in the United States is substantial.

“Using US government-supplied computer models, we showed that a core meltdown at a nuclear reactor outside of Chicago (Braidwood) could kill tens of thousands, cause hundreds of thousands to suffer from acute radiation sickness, and would require the evacuation of over 6 million people,” said Andrew S. Kanter, MD MPH, president -elect of PSR.

“To protect public health, the United States must redouble efforts to make sure all reactors in the U.S. are operating in the safest possible manner,” said Peter Wilk, MD, Executive Director of Physicians for Social Responsibility.

PSR is calling on the Obama Administration to take the following measures without delay:

- Suspend operations nuclear reactors in the United States with a similar design as those in Japan and those on fault lines while a safety review is conducted.
- Implement a moratorium on new nuclear reactor licensing and design certification without delay.
- Upgrade spent fuel pools and harden onsite fuel storage for all operating reactors immediately.
- Reject the renewal of any licenses for existing reactors until all the lessons of the Fukushima accident are incorporated, including how to deal with station blackouts.

- Eliminate subsidies for new reactors, especially loan guarantees, and prioritize safe, clean renewable energy sources that can meet today's energy needs.

“The crisis in Japan proves that clean renewable energy is the safest, most sustainable and viable solution to meet our energy needs,” said Ira Helfand, MD. “All forms of energy production have associated risks. Nuclear power risks are particularly significant for public health. Problems include the build-up of radioactive waste, and the potential of terrorist attacks, natural disasters, design flaws and operator error contributing to unintended radiation exposures and resulting illnesses and deaths. Safe renewable energy sources already exist that can meet our energy needs, such as wind, solar, and geothermal, as well as energy efficiency.”

ABOUT PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (PSR)

Physicians for Social Responsibility is the largest physician-led organization in the country conveying both the health risks and threats to human survival posed by nuclear weapons, climate change, nuclear reactors and toxic degradation of the environment. Founded in 1961 by physicians concerned about the impact of nuclear proliferation, PSR shared the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize with International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War for building public pressure to end the nuclear arms race. PSR is dedicated to improving national policy formulation and decision-making about security, energy and the environment through the combined efforts of credible, committed health professionals and our active and concerned citizen members. For more information, go to <http://www.psr.org>.

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