



BEYOND NUCLEAR BACKGROUNDER

"No one died at TMI" is not the whole story

Lessons from TMI

February 25, 2014

"No one was killed or injured at Three Mile Island, not so much as a sprained ankle..."
Scott Simon, [NPR broadcast](#), March 28, 2009

The nuclear industry is fond of claiming that no one died at Three Mile Island. This industry claim has remained the same for Fukushima and the media often parrot this deceptive statement when referring to these two disasters. The industry uses this focus on death from radiation exposure to obfuscate many radiation impacts, while in reality not all radiation health impacts pop up immediately and death isn't always the result.

Long after a catastrophic radiation release, disease can still manifest, both from the initial radiation exposure and from slow environmental poisoning, as the radionuclides released by the disaster are ingested or inhaled for many generations. During this time, as memory of these disasters fade in the public mind, nuclear industry apologists finagle research and legal systems to their benefit in an attempt to dampen the impact, at least on paper, of civilian atomic reactors. In the case of the Three Mile Island disaster, it took a court order to "cover up" the health impacts.

The TMI Public Health Fund was established to pay for public health research related to the disaster. If a researcher wanted to conduct a study using money from this Fund, they had to obey the parameters set forth by Federal Judge Sylvia Rambo, who was in charge of the Fund:

1. Any researchers studying the health impact of Three Mile Island radiation emissions were prohibited from assessing "worst case estimates" of radiation releases unless such estimates would lead to a conclusion of insignificant amount of harm—that being "less than 0.01 health effects". This despite monitors that failed to measure all the radioactive releases of the disaster.
2. If a researcher wanted to claim more harm or investigate a worst-case scenario, an expert selected by nuclear industry insurers would have to "concur on the nature and scope of the [dosimetry] projects."

Studies conducted by three universities (Columbia, Pittsburgh, North Carolina Chapel Hill) on the impacts of the Three Mile Island disaster show breast, lung, leukemia and general cancer increases, some associated with proximity to the plant, some in the pathways of the radioactive plumes. However, because of the proscriptive court order governing the TMI Public Health Fund, the two studies that were funded by it ([Hatch, et al.](#) from Columbia and [Talbot, et al.](#) from Pittsburgh) were **unable** to attribute the increases in their studies to radiation exposure. These two investigators were forced to conclude "Radiation emissions, as *modeled mathematically*, did not account for the observed increase." (emphasis added) Their compromised study conclusions help to prop up the mirage that "no one was killed or was injured at TMI".

Only the research [paper by Wing, et al.](#), University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, was able to attribute the cancer increases to radiation from Three Mile Island because researchers had obtained independent funding, allowing them to investigate the actual

evidence rather than rely on court-ordered restraints and industry-collected data. Lending further credibility to their research, Wing et al., used outside research (Shevshenko et al.) which examined radiation-specific markers in residents' blood, called biomarkers, to assess dose rather than relying solely on industry-measured (or mis-measured as the case was) radiation emissions. So when held up to independent, scientifically robust investigation, the statement that "no one died or was injured at TMI" clearly does not represent the whole story although it makes for an expedient industry sound bite.