

WHO Rollercoaster on Nuclear Radiation



Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) distances herself from WHO's previous position on evaluating nuclear risks. An increase in permissible levels for radiation exposure in Japan triggered this change.

"There is no such thing as a safe dose for low-level radiation" explained Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organisation, to members of the critical group "Independent WHO" in a spontaneous meeting with them. Up until now WHO has consistently stuck to the position agreed with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which claims that ionising radiation is safe below a certain dose. This about-face occurs just before the World Health Assembly is due to take place from May 16 to 24 where cooperation with IAEA is on the agenda.

Chan was referring to incorporated radioactive particles like iodine 131, caesium 137, strontium 90 and other substances that are taken into the body through food, drink or breathing air with this statement. These particles settle in the thyroid gland, bones and inner organs where they continue to radiate. Numerous studies by independent scientists have shown that such particles from the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe in April 1986 are responsible for up to 95 % of all radiation-induced cancers and genetic mutation.

Up until now WHO has denied the existence of internal radiation. In all of its statements on potential health risks, only external ionising radiation were referred to, based on the first, and to date, only data taken in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the nuclear bombings in 1945.



Fukushima data still under lock and key

Chan distanced herself also from previous WHO statements on the effects of Chernobyl. "I personally do not believe that the Chernobyl nuclear accident only caused 50 deaths" stated the WHO Director-General, according to notes taken at the meeting with the critic's group. As agreed with IAEA, WHO has claimed officially that only 52 irradiated people died as a direct result of the Chernobyl catastrophe and up to 6000 more developed thyroid cancer. These are the same figures that the UN Scientific Commission on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) quoted in their publication of February of this year.

However, despite correcting previous positions, when referring to Fukushima Chan continues to insist that she has "fully exercised her responsibility ... without being compromised by the 1959 agreement with IAEA in any way". Chan defended the much-criticised fact that WHO has up until now held the measurement data on Fukushima under lock and key that it, and IAEA, regularly receives from CTBTO, an organisation set up to monitor the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Only one radiation expert left at WHO

CTBTO has 80 monitoring stations around the globe that constantly take measurements of ionising radiation in the atmosphere. The Central Office for Meteorology and Geodynamic (ZAMG) in Vienna also has access to CTBTO data and thereby established already by the end of March that radioactive emissions from Fukushima were much higher than those given by the Japanese authorities. Even so, WHO and IAEA have continued to publicly quote the Japanese figures.

Chan stated that WHO would only publish the CTBTO data "if they were to indicate dangerous levels". This would be "her decision only". At the same time, the Director-General added that she was "not an expert on nuclear radiation" and that "WHO has practically no more competence in this field". The department on radiobiology at the WHO headquarters in Geneva was closed down two years ago under pressure from private and state funders. The deputy head of the department had previously attempted to get the WHO limits for iodine exposure lowered, without success, due to resistance from IAEA and France. Today there is only one single radiobiologist at the WHO headquarters.



WHO cannot publish its findings

Chan told the NGO "Independent WHO" that she would try to "find out what happened to the documents from the 2001 joint conference with IAEA on Chernobyl held in Kiev". Until now WHO has claimed that these documents have already been published in their entirety. In actual fact only a short summary of the proceedings was published. Out of 700 documents of the first WHO/IAEA joint conference on Chernobyl in 1995, only 12 have been published. According to a TV interview with Hiroshi Nakashima, who was WHO Director-General at that time, this was due to IAEA intervention under the terms of the agreement with WHO.

Toshiko Kosak, official nuclear adviser to the Japanese government, resigned from his post at the end of April and, in front of TV cameras, tearfully lamented the government decision on radiation limits. He criticised both the increase in exposure limits permitted for nuclear workers in Fukushima and the new annual limit of 20 milliSievert for schoolchildren in the vicinity of the nuclear power plant. He complained that it was unacceptable, saying "as a scientist, I cannot condone this". Professor Kosak had only just been given the position this March by Prime Minister Naoto Kan.

At the end of the day, concrete measures for action to protect the population remain in the hands of national governments. Nevertheless, WHO -- founded in 1948 with 192 member states - is responsible for informing and educating people on public health issues. Observers are of the opinion that a withdrawal from the agreement with IAEA could therefore play a role in the coming World Health Assembly from May 16 to 24.

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