

The A-Bomb Programme and Water Fluoridation

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Bomb-program scientists played a prominent -- if unpublicized -- role in the nation's first-planned water fluoridation experiment, in Newburgh, New York. The Newburgh Demonstration Project is considered the most extensive study of the health effects of fluoridation, supplying much of the evidence that low doses are safe for children's bones, and good for their teeth.

Planning began in 1943 with the appointment of a special New York State Health Department committee to study the advisability of adding fluoride to Newburgh's drinking water. The chairman of the committee was Dr. Hodge, then chief of fluoride toxicity studies for the Manhattan Project.

Subsequent members included Henry L. Barnett, a captain in the Project's Medical section, and John W. Fertig, in 1944 with the office of Scientific Research and Development, the Pentagon group which sired the Manhattan Project. Their military affiliations were kept secret: Hodge was described as a pharmacologist, Barnett as a pediatrician. Placed in charge of the Newburgh project was David B. Ast, chief dental officer of the State Health Department. Ast had participated in a key [secret wartime conference](#) on fluoride held by the Manhattan Project, and later worked with Dr. Hodge on the Project's investigation of human injury in the New Jersey incident, according to once-secret memos.

The committee recommended that Newburgh be fluoridated. It also selected the types of medical studies to be done, and "provided expert guidance" for the duration of the experiment. The key question to be answered was: "Are there any cumulative effects -- beneficial or otherwise, on tissues and organs other than the teeth -- of long-continued ingestion of such small concentrations...?" According to the declassified documents, this was also key information sought by the bomb program, which would require long-continued exposure of workers and communities to fluoride throughout the Cold War.

In May 1945, Newburgh's water was fluoridated, and over the next ten years its residents were studied by the State Health Department. In tandem, Program F conducted its own secret studies, focusing on the amounts of fluoride Newburgh citizens retained in their blood and tissues - key information sought by the bomb program: "Possible toxic effects of fluoride were in the forefront of consideration," the advisory committee stated. Health Department personnel cooperated, shipping blood and placenta samples to the Program F team at the University of Rochester. The samples were collected by Dr. David B. Overton, the Department's chief of pediatric studies at Newburgh.

The final report of the Newburgh Demonstration Project, published in 1956 in the Journal of the American Dental Association, concluded that "small concentrations" of fluoride were safe for U.S. citizens. The biological proof -- "based on work performed ... at the University of Rochester Atomic Energy Project" -- was delivered by Dr. Hodge.

Today, news that scientists from the atomic bomb program secretly shaped and guided the Newburgh fluoridation experiment, and studied the citizen's blood and tissue samples, is greeted with incredulity.

"I'm shocked -- beyond words," said present-day Newburgh Mayor Audrey Carey, commenting on these reporters' findings. "It reminds me of the Tuskegee experiment that was done on syphilis patients down in Alabama."

As a child in the early 1950's, Mayor Carey was taken to the old firehouse on Broadway in Newburgh, which housed the Public Health Clinic. There, doctors from the Newburgh fluoridation project studied her teeth, and a peculiar fusion of two finger bones on her left hand she had been born with. Today, adds Carey, her granddaughter has white dental-fluorosis marks on her front teeth.

Mayor Carey wants answers from the government about the secret history of fluoride, and the Newburgh fluoridation experiment. "I absolutely want to pursue it," she said. "It is appalling to do any kind of experimentation and study without people's knowledge and permission."

Contacted by these reporters, the director of the Newburgh experiment, David B. Ast, says he was unaware Manhattan Project scientists were involved. "If I had known, I would have been certainly investigating why, and what the connection was," he said. Did he know that blood and placenta samples from Newburgh were being sent to bomb program researchers at the University of Rochester? "I was not aware of it," Ast replied. Did he recall participating in the Manhattan Project's secret wartime conference on fluoride in January 1944, or going to New Jersey with Dr. Hodge to investigate human injury in the du Pont case--as secret memos state? He told the

reporters he had no recollection of these events.

A spokesperson for the University of Rochester Medical Center, Bob Loeb, confirmed that blood and tissue samples from Newburgh had been tested by the University's Dr. Hodge. On the ethics of secretly studying U.S. citizens to obtain information useful in litigation against the A-bomb program, he said, "that's a question we cannot answer." He referred inquiries to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), successor to the Atomic Energy Commission.

A spokesperson for the DOE in Washington, Jayne Brady, confirmed that a review of DOE files indicated that a "significant reason" for fluoride experiments conducted at the University of Rochester after the war was "impending litigation between the du Pont company and residents of New Jersey areas." However, she added, "DOE has found no documents to indicate that fluoride research was done to protect the Manhattan Project or its contractors from lawsuits."

On Manhattan Project involvement in Newburgh, the spokesperson stated, "Nothing that we have suggests that the DOE or predecessor agencies -- especially the Manhattan Project -- authorized fluoride experiments to be performed on children in the 1940's."

When told that the reporters had several documents that directly tied the Manhattan Project's successor agency at the University of Rochester, the AEP, to the Newburgh experiment, the DOE spokesperson later conceded her study was confined to "the available universe" of documents. Two days later spokesperson Jayne Brady faxed a statement for clarification: "My search only involved the documents that we collected as part of our human radiation experiments project -- fluoride was not part of our research effort.

"Most significantly," the statement continued, relevant documents may be in a classified collection at the DOE Oak Ridge National Laboratory known as the Records Holding Task Group. "This collection consists entirely of classified documents removed from other files for the purpose of classified document accountability many years ago," and was "a rich source of documents for the human radiation experiments project," she said.

The crucial question arising from this investigation is: Were adverse health findings from Newburgh and other bomb-program fluoride studies suppressed? All AEC-funded studies had to be declassified before publication in civilian medical and dental journals. Where are the original classified versions?

The transcript of one of the major secret scientific conferences of WW2--on "fluoride metabolism"--is missing from the files of the U.S. National Archives. Participants in the conference included key figures who promoted the safety of fluoride and water fluoridation to the public after the war - Harold Hodge of the Manhattan Project, David B. Ast of the Newburgh Project, and U.S. Public Health Service dentist H. Trendley Dean, popularly known as the "father of fluoridation." "If it is missing from the files, it is probably still classified," National Archives librarians told these reporters.

A 1944 WW2 Manhattan Project classified report on water fluoridation is missing from the files of the University of Rochester Atomic Energy Project, the U.S. National Archives, and the Nuclear Repository at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The next four numerically consecutive documents are also missing, while the remainder of the "MP-1500 series" is present. "Either those documents are still classified, or they've been 'disappeared' by the government," says Clifford Honicker, Executive Director of the American Environmental Health Studies Project, in Knoxville, Tennessee, which provided key evidence in the public exposure and prosecution of U.S. human radiation experiments.

Seven pages have been cut out of a 1947 Rochester bomb-project notebook entitled "Du Pont litigation." "Most unusual," commented chief medical school archivist Chris Hoolihan.

Similarly, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests by these authors over a year ago with the DOE for hundreds of classified fluoride reports have failed to dislodge any. "We're behind," explained Amy Rothrock, FOIA officer for the Department of Energy at their Oak Ridge operations.

Was information suppressed? These reporters made what appears to be the first discovery of the original classified version of a fluoride safety study by bomb program scientists. A censored version of this study was later published in the August 1948 Journal of the American Dental Association. Comparison of the secret with the published version indicates that the U.S. AEC did censor damaging information on fluoride, to the point of tragicomedy.

This was a study of the dental and physical health of workers in a factory producing fluoride for the A-bomb program, conducted by a team of dentists from the Manhattan Project.

* The secret version reports that most of the men had no teeth left. The published version reports only that the men had fewer cavities.

* The secret version says the men had to wear rubber boots because the fluoride fumes disintegrated the nails in their shoes. The published version does not mention this.

* The secret version says the fluoride may have acted similarly on the men's teeth, contributing to their toothlessness. The published version omits this statement.

The published version concludes that "the men were unusually healthy, judged from both a medical and dental point of view."

Asked for comment on the early links of the Manhattan Project to water fluoridation, Dr Harold Slavkin, Director of the National Institute for Dental Research, the U.S. agency which today funds fluoride research, said, "I wasn't aware of any input from the Atomic Energy Commission." Nevertheless, he insisted, fluoride's efficacy and safety in the prevention of dental cavities over the last fifty years is well-proved. "The motivation of a scientist is often different from the outcome," he reflected. "I do not hold a prejudice about where the knowledge comes from."

After comparing the secret and published versions of the censored study, toxicologist Phyllis Mullenix commented, "This makes me ashamed to be a scientist." Of other Cold War-era fluoride safety studies, she asks, "Were they all done like this?"

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