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Scientist study Tahiti cancer risk

Two international research scientists have been conducting an epidemiological study of the thyroid cancer risk factor in Tahiti that could determine if a high number of such cancer cases are linked to France's former nuclear tests.

Dr. Florent de Vathaire, director of the cancer epidemiological unit at Villejuif, France, and his counterpart, Vladimir Drozdovitch, director of research at the International Cancer Research Center, are due to come up with their conclusions in six months.

They have been in French Polynesia for several weeks working on a vast study that is divided up into three parts. The first part, which began in the 1990s, involved a geographical analysis of radioactive fallout from the French nuclear tests conducted from 1966 to 1996 on two remote Tuamotu atolls.

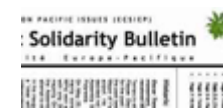
The second part of the study looked at leukemia cases and other blood cancer cases. The third part, which began in 2002, is studying thyroid cancer cases, about which little is known when set against the background of the French nuclear tests.

France conducted 41 atmospheric tests between 1966 and 1974, 140 underground tests between 1975 and 1991 and eight underground tests that ended in May 1996. The tests were conducted on the atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa in the southeastern area of the Tuamotu Archipelago, 1,200 kilometers

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(720 miles) from Papeete.

"We collected all thyroid cancer cases from 1983 to 2002," Dr. Vathaire said during a Friday press conference in Papeete. "We have randomly selected subjects who were born about the same day and we compared all collected information."

The two research scientists also had access to meteorological data during the nuclear tests and reports made public the French state. However, the French military refused to make its documents available to the scientists, he said.

In another six months, the two scientists should be able to determine whether a possible cause and effect relationship exists between the abnormally high rate of thyroid cancer in French Polynesia and the French nuclear tests.

The scientists noted that French Polynesia has two to three times more thyroid cancer cases than France, but two times less the number of cases in New Caledonia, one of France's two other Pacific territories far from the French nuclear testing sites. So the two scientists think it may be possible that the genes of native populations may be more susceptible to the development of thyroid cancer. They said a study is underway on this aspect of thyroid cancer.

Obesity, eating habits, hormonal factors and multiple pregnancies could also have a relationship with the development of thyroid cancer, which affects nine times more women than men in French Polynesia, they said.

At the moment, not a lot is known about thyroid cancer, particularly as a result of radiation. And all indications are that at least 20 years are necessary before a person develops thyroid cancer, so now is the best time to see what effects, if any, the radiation from the nuclear tests had, Dr. de Vathaire said.

Tahitipresse, 22 January 2006



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