

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #4 - NY Brings Criminal Charges For Toxic Contamination Of Workers

December 21, 1986

The Pymm Thermometer Corporation of Brooklyn, NY, two of its executives and a plant foreman were indicted on charges of criminally assaulting and recklessly endangering the lives of their workers by "knowingly and continually" having them exposed to toxic mercury. It was the first time that criminal charges had been brought in NY against corporate executives for wrongful exposure of workers to toxic chemicals. The indictment says that one of the 80 employees of the plant suffered permanent brain damage from mercury poisoning and the defendants were charged with assaulting the man with mercury as the weapon. According to the state attorney general, an undetermined number of other employees were endangered by the mercury, a chemical that has been linked to kidney damage and loss of vision. The Pymm defendants established a covert mercury-recovery operation in Apr. 1983 in the cellar of the plant and managed to hide it from federal inspectors until Oct. 1985. The injured employee worked in the cellar for 11 months, where he received the exposure that led to his injuries. The defendants, also accused of conspiracy and falsifying business records, pleaded not guilty.

--Peter Montague

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### NEW JERSEY JOINS 1979 SUIT TO STOP INTERSTATE CONTAMINATION

NJ officials filed suit in federal court in New York city, charging the solid waste from the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, NY, was polluting waters that flow into NJ and posing a serious health risk to state residents. The lawsuit, filed by the NJ State Attorney General's office and the State Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), says the city is violating the federal Clean Water Act and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. The suit asks the district court judge to allow the state to join a federal suit filed for the same reason in 1979 against NYC by Woodbridge Township, NJ and asks the judge to order the city to permanently curtail the pollution and immediately end use of the landfill.

--Peter Montague

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### DOCTORS OFFER NEW WAY TO HELP PREGNANT WOMEN KICK CIGARETTES

Two Pennsylvania physicians offer \$100 discounts to patients who quit smoking during pregnancy, citing evidence that babies born to mothers who smoke are usually smaller than normal. The doctors, from Parkside-- a suburb of Philadelphia--report some success in their effort. Of about 100 patients who were smoking at the time, 75 took them up on their discount offer and pledged to stop smoking and 40 of those 75 were successful in quitting. The doctors, Irving A. Mann and Robert W. Haggerty, said they would continue the program and hope the percentages will improve over the years. Dr. Mann said he thought they got larger and healthier babies as a result.

--Peter Montague

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### NEW BOOKLET TELLS HOW TO FIND INFORMATION ABOUT TOXICS IN NJ

An environmental research organization--Inform, Inc.--has released a guide to the various federal and state programs that collect data on the chemicals used and disposed of by companies and plants in the state of New Jersey. No centralized bureau contains all of the information on which, and how much, of several hundred hazardous substances companies are using, producing or disposing of, but interested citizens, local officials, community groups and journalists

can use the guide--"Tracking Toxic Wastes in New Jersey"--to find out which agency collects the kind of information they are looking for. The guide is available for \$15 (discounts for nonprofit organizations and bulk orders) from Inform, 381 Park Avenue South, New York 10016.

--Peter Montague

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### THALIDOMIDE VICTIM CAN NOW SUE GOVERNMENT; NEW PRECEDENT SET

On Oct. 21, 1986 President Reagan signed legislation that gives a man deformed by the drug thalidomide the right to sue the federal government. Mr. Reagan signed the bill over objections from the Pentagon and Justice Department, which said it set bad legal precedent. Stephen McKenna, 26, was born without legs in a US Army hospital after a doctor under contract with the Army in West Germany gave his mother thalidomide during pregnancy. At the time of his birth, thalidomide was widely prescribed as a sleep-inducing and anti-nausea drug for pregnant women in Europe but was banned in the US because it was not proved safe.

--Peter Montague

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### FEDERAL AGENCY RELEASED HIGH RADIOACTIVITY ON PEOPLE IN '40S

According to documents of the Department of Energy (DOE), the Hanford nuclear reservation routinely released radioactive iodine wastes during the 1940s that gave major radiation doses to thousands of civilians in the Pacific Northwest. The discharges were on a scale that today would be considered a major nuclear accident, but the DOE said it cannot calculate the amount of exposure. Exposure is figured in part on how much milk and leafy vegetables were raised and consumed in the area. Radioactive iodine is absorbed by the body from air, food or drink, especially cows' milk. Radioactive iodine concentrates in the thyroid gland, where the radiation can cause cancer or other problems. The previously secret information was made public in response to questions from news organizations of the maximum possible exposure to a hypothetical citizen of Hanford, Washington.

--Peter Montague

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