

MID-MICHIGAN

PBB WHISTLEBLOWER BATTLED OVER DANGERS

By **Linda Gittleman**

For the Morning Sun

Dr. Tom Corbett said he remembers appearing on “Good Morning America” and having to debate a representative of the La Leche League.

The La Leche League is an advocacy group for breast feeding and Corbett, an early researcher and whistleblower on the dangers of PBB, was urging Michigan women not to breast feed their children.

Anyone living in the state in the early 1970s had almost certainly consumed PBB (polybrominated biphenyl) and still likely has some of the fire retardant chemical in their bodies now.

Time has proved Corbett right.

Although much more still has to be learned about the effects of PBB in humans, it is known now that many children of mothers exposed to PBB have had health problems and for the children who were breast fed, the problems have been worse, he said.

While the state continues to reel from the Flint water crisis and its lead poisoning, few in the mid-Michigan area – and farmers throughout the state – can forget when thousands of pounds of the fire retardant made at Michigan Chemical (Velsicol) in St. Louis got mixed with cattle feed and subsequently made its way into the food chain.

Contaminated feed was eaten by cattle, pigs, chickens and sheep, among others.

It was deemed the worst agricultural disaster in history.

Few too can't help but notice the similarities in the state between the Flint water crisis now and the PBB disaster then.

Corbett was in St. Louis Wednesday night to speak to members of the Pine River Superfund Task Force on just what happened in the mid-1970s.

The anesthesiologist, researcher, author and graduate of the University of Michigan Medical School said he recalled reading a newspaper story about the PBB incident, then another about the number of herds destroyed.

The medical problems were of more interest to him and he decided to conduct studies.

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LINDA GITTLEMAN — FOR THE MORNING SUN

Dr. Tom Corbett, an early whistleblower on the dangers of PBB facing Michigan residents in the 1970s, spoke to members of the Pine River Task Force on Wednesday.

Researcher

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"Nobody had really studied this and studies needed to be done," he said.

Wanting to find out as much as he could and as fast as he could, he tested pregnant mice and rats.

Of those animals that survived the gestation - many didn't - a significant number were born with birth defects.

"(In 1974) I called the (Michigan) Department of Agriculture and they didn't seem too interested," he said. "They wanted to know how much it was going to cost. Not a word was said about potential health risks."

He remembers too

speaking with members of the Farm Bureau - and again not receiving an exactly enthusiastic response.

Corbett said he was pulled aside and told, "We don't want you telling anybody about this."

But people have a right to know, he said he responded.

"I felt the state of Michigan was not doing their job," he said.

Deciding he needed some help, he called upon Dr. Irving Selikoff, now most remembered for his pioneering work on the dangers of asbestos.

Selikoff would be glad to help but he needed an invitation from the state, Corbett said.

He again contacted the MDA and was told that they "didn't need an out-

sider" coming into the state and telling them what to do.

He got much the same response from the Michigan Department of Health.

It wasn't until a headline appeared in a newspaper saying, "Governor (Milliken) refuses to invite expert," that matters changed.

When he came to Michigan, Selikoff brought a team with him and spent two days with Corbett, providing much needed help in learning more about the impact on PBB, he said.

Having to battle the director of the MDA, B. Dale Ball, now deceased, wasn't easy, Corbett said.

"But I felt sorry for the guy," he said. "He didn't have the background to handle those problems."

The state however, began a health survey of Michigan farm families exposed to PBB and the MD Anderson Hospital in Houston completed some analysis on that data. And it was learned that Michigan's residents had a higher rate of cancer in the digestive systems.

Although there haven't been conclusive studies to directly link cancer to PBB - not "proof positive" - there have been enough, Corbett said.

There have been studies linking PCB to cancer and PBB, a close relative, is considered more toxic, he said.

So PBB is "probably carcinogenic," he said.

Corbett explained that it usually takes about 20 years to develop cancer when exposed to a carci-

nogenic.

And it was just about 20 years after Michigan began tracking farm families exposed to PBB, it defunded and ended the study.

A lot of data was lost.

However, Emory University has picked up where the state left, and has in the last few years conducted several tests among chemical workers and their families in St. Louis and farm families around the state.

The trouble with the PBB disaster and the Flint water crisis is that those exposures - to lead or PBB - will affect people their whole lives, Corbett said.

A long term study is needed in Flint and Corbett said he can only hope the state doesn't drop it like it did with PBB studv.