Residents learn more about PBB exposure

About 50 people attend meeting in Ithaca to ask scientists questions

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Brad Peet and his family want to find out as much as possible about whether or not production of fire retardant Polybrominated biphenyl (commonly known as PBB) at the now-former Michigan Chemical Corporation in St. Louis may have caused a series of health problems for them.

“You’re concerned about your health and the health of your children and grandchildren,” said Peet, from St. Louis.

At 53 years old, Peet — now 59 — had a quadruple bypass, and his wife Jeanne experienced stroke symptoms at 50 years old.

In addition, his 12-year-old granddaughter was born with spina bifida and six-year-old granddaughter suffers from motor speech disorder Aparxia.

Approximately 50 people attended a meeting Saturday at the Mid-Michigan District Health Department in Ithaca to ask questions of scientists from Emory University in Atlanta, Ga. who are doing research on the effects of PBB and who have been studying it for more than 20 years.

The scientists also disclosed preliminary study results show PBB exposure is impacting people three generations out from the initial exposure occurring.

Attendees were asked to complete a questionnaire and for their family members to complete it as well - even those living outside of Michigan - so more information can be sent to them to study. In addition, the health department was also doing blood draws of people who requested it related to the PBB exposure.

PBB was produced at the Michigan Chemical Corporation up until 1974, when the plant...
Exposure

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closed due to improper handling of chemicals being disclosed.

In particular, a mix up in 1973 sent PBB to a farm bureau in Battle Creek and was mixed with animal feed, said Jane Keon, member of the Pine River Super Fund Task Force, which has been advocating for more studies and work to be done to fix the PBB problem.

“It was sold to farmers and animals ate it and it got mixed with the human food chain,” said Keon, who indicated foods such as meat, eggs, cheese and butter created from the animals became contaminated and humans ate the food, becoming poisoned by it.

Approximately 9 million people were impacted in the year after the plant closed, she said.

Short-term health effects of PBB exposure include acne, aching joints in young people, and hair loss, while long-term effects include female children of parents exposed to PBB having miscarriages and, in boys, a higher risk of testicular cancer, among other effects.

Presenting information and answering questions were doctors Michelle Marcus and Melanie Pearson from Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health.

Residents from around Gratiot County and elsewhere listen to Dr. Michelle Marcus (front of room) from the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga. present and answer questions on Saturday Dec. 9, 2017 at the Mid-Michigan District Health Department in Ithaca about polybrominated biphenyl (PBB) exposure. Marcus and others are studying its effects on residents after it was accidentally mixed with animal feed in 1973 when it was shipped to a farm bureau in Battle Creek, contaminating the food from the animals and the humans who ate it.

“PBB does appear to be a disrupter of the endocrine system,” said Marcus said. Although her work began in the 1990s, a study was done in 1978 on PBB effects of 6,000 people statewide. Some of those people or their descendents were at the meeting.

Since the study began, more people have signed up to be part of it, she said. “We don’t know the answer of whether people are still exposed to PBB,” Marcus said.

It does remain in soil but is not dissolvable in water, she said. “We think it’s unlikely it’s in the water,” Marcus said.

However, fish who eat from the Pine River are still contaminated with PBB.

“Because it was manufactured in Gratiot County and St. Louis, it means the men and women who worked at the plant got a whole lot in their bodies,” Keon said. “The people who lived in the town got it in the air, in skin, breathed it in and ate it.”

A lifelong St. Louis resident and former employee of Michigan Chemical Corporation, Gary Smith may be one of those people who became sick from it.

Within the last two years, he found out he had a thyroid tumor (which was successfully removed) and problems with his pituitary gland.

“I can’t say what it’s related to,” said Smith, who had also worked at Dow Chemical in Midland, Todd Petroleum oil refinery and has been exposed to herbicide Agent Orange as well. “My playground was the river (as a kid).”

Also a member of the Pine River Super Fund Task Force for the past 19 years, he said attempts to receive money from the state to study PBB have been denied, as have attempts at the national level, until the Emory University study.

“We do need these health studies funded,” Smith said. “We need access to the records they’re not allowing us to have. We need their help.”