

Original state PBB registry being withheld from researchers



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An effort to obtain nearly 7,000 original blood samples of participants in the Michigan Long-Term PBB study held by the Michigan Department of [Health](#) and Human Services is wearing thin.

Lead PBB scientist Dr. Michele Marcus, her team at Emory University in Atlanta, and volunteers with the St. Louis-based Pine River Superfund Citizen Task Force have solicited state officials to release the PBB registry of names created in 1978. But they have hit a perpetual roadblock.

PBB stands for polybrominated biphenyl. The chemical was used in a popular flame-retardant product Firemaster that insulated electrical equipment. It was manufactured at the Michigan Chemical plant in St. Louis.

In 1973 the Firemaster product was mistakenly packaged into Nutrimaster bags and distributed statewide as a nutritional supplement for animal feed. Michigan Chemical held a distribution contract with the Michigan [Farm](#) Bureau which, in turn, sold the product to farmers. The mix-up came to light a year later.

State health officials created the registry to record incidents of exposure. But that progress ceased 20 years ago.

Marcus and the Emory research team resumed the research. They travel around the state holding informational sessions and taking new blood samples. They hope to identify possible health effects of former chemical plant employees and their offspring, farmers who learned their herds had been contaminated with the animal feed, and consumers who unknowingly bought contaminated meat products they prepared for their families.

The purpose of the original PBB longterm study was to identify health concerns possibly brought on by the toxic chemical exposure contributing to infertility, skin rashes, hair loss, memory problems or muscle and joint problems thyroid problems, and some cancers.

It was Marcus who picked up the mantle to delve into the health effects of PBB exposure.

Marcus and her team from the Emory Rollins School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology, will give updates on their research at an informational session planned at the Evergreen Resort in Cadillac on Sept. 16 from 2 to 4 p.m.

When the team held a conference in Ithaca last April in attendance were State Epidemiologist Sarah Lyon-Callo and Director of Environmental Health Kory Groetsch. Both are with MDHHS.

A DHHS spokesperson contacted for this story said no one would be available until mid-August for comment.

At the CAG meeting in St. Louis on July 29, local Health Officer Marcus Cheatham elaborated on the letter he sent to the state department petitioning copies of the PBB records.

The Mid Michigan District Health Department official said the records ought to be available for research, education and for families of deceased study participants.

He cited the Michigan Public Health Code that clearly established the local health department is entitled to the health information.

CAG Secretary Jane Keon replied in an email to The Herald July 29 that “health records are still in limbo.” She said it is “very frustrating for the families of the original participants, and the entire PBB community.”

The Emory PBB research team has been conducting two studies. The criteria for a PBB Exposure Study examines how long PBB stays in the body and why this may differ from person to person. A PBB multi-generational Study examines if genetic markers associated with PBB exposure of parents are seen in children and grandchildren. For this study, they need an exposed grandfather, unexposed grandmother, an adult child, and a grandchild. All four must be willing to participate to qualify.

Even if blood had been drawn years ago, newer tests are more sensitive today and will show more information.

So far, studies have indicated chemical workers have the highest levels of PBB. To become a participant in the PBB research, complete a health questionnaire email PBBregistry@emory.edu.