

OBITUARY - ERIC VOICE (The plutonium man)

Dr Eric Voice, who once described himself as "the most radioactive man on the planet", has died from motor neurone disease, aged 80. For over a decade, he voluntarily took part in human experiments on the effect of plutonium. to prove his belief that it has no harmful effect whatsoever. He willingly allowed his body to be infused with plutonium often described as the most dangerous substance known to man - first by injection and then through direct inhalation. These studies were designed to find out how to treat people in the event of accidental exposure.

The lengths to which he went to justify his beliefs were extraordinary. His neighbours in Thurso. on the north coast of Scotland, became used to the regular visits of an armoured van to pick up his bodily waste, for example. "The practicalities can be a bit irksome but I'm used to it", he said. "When I arrive at people's houses with a carrier bag of bottles. people assume I've brought them a gift but. when I explain I can't use their facilities their expressions are extremely comical."

In 1945, appalled by the news that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. Voice became a founder member or the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament with Bertrand Russell. He later swore that he would "work towards utilising this wonderful source or energy for the benefit of mankind". and remained convinced to the end of his days that nuclear power is our only hope for the future in the fight against global warming.

Dr Voice spent 15 years in biochemical research and 28 years in the nuclear industry, many as a chemist at the Dounreay nuclear establishment 10 Caithness Scotland. One of the first scientists on the site, he worked out of a Nissen hut while the complex was constructed. As part of his work, he made several trips to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine after the reactor accident in 1986.

In the mid-1990s, at AEA Technology's biomedical research laboratories in Harwell, England, he took part in a series of trials lasting several years. The experiments tracked the movement of plutonium in blood. bone and internal organs. The main trials involved injecting six male and six female volunteers with plutonium-237, a γ -emitter with a 45-day half-life, which could be tracked from outside the body. The results of the trials, published in the National Radiological Protection Board's internal newsletter, showed that, in males, plutonium injected into the bloodstream accumulated in the liver. but didn't lodge in either bone or reproductive organs.

Dr Voice was one of two volunteers who then took the experiments a stage further. Several times a year, he would travel to Harwell and inhale plutonium-239 and -244 straight into his lungs. This was to provide information on absorption levels in the lungs, behaviour in the bloodstream and the speed at which plutonium travels to the gut.

He lived in good health after the tests, and remained fit and active in his retirement. In 1999. he caused a stir by stating: "There is no evidence that any human on Earth has suffered in health from plutonium and I have no adverse effects."

Editorial note: This Obituary' contains material from articles published in "The Scotsman". DJH