

DID SECRET BEAM PRODUCE RUMORS—OR BRAIN TUMORS?

Something either very strange or very coincidental is alleged to have happened at an electronics plant in Pennsylvania. The company involved says nothing significant happened at all. What makes the affair so intriguing is the degree of secrecy surrounding it.

According to a source in Harrisburg, astrocytoma, a brain tumor with an incidence of 2.9 per 100,000 people in the state, has occurred since October 1969 in perhaps as many as four engineers in a group of 23 working on an unidentified program at an unnamed plant. Inquiries by MWN have pinpointed the Philco-Ford facility on Wissahickon Avenue in Philadelphia, and implicated a government project that may have exposed workers to nonionizing electromagnetic radiation.

Not so, declares a Philco-Ford spokesman. There has been just one sure case of brain tumor recorded there, he says; the victim had a history of head injury and was a managerial type who rarely ventured into the plant's electronic screen rooms. Besides, he says, those rooms contain no ambient radiation, and being in one is "as safe as standing next to a light bulb."

Dr. Herbert L. Northrop, medical director of Philco-Ford, concedes that a second man died of a tumor, but says the engineer was working for another firm when it happened.

Edward Baier, director of the state environmental resources department's division of occupational health, asserts that to his knowledge, two engineers developed the tumor and died, one last June, the other last August. Information on a possible third case is sketchy, says the health official, and as for the fourth, "I have only a name that seems Spanish or Italian." That patient, he adds, has apparently disappeared.

Three of the four men are said to have been under 40 years of age when the tumor appeared; it is supposed to be extremely rare in this age group. In briefly describing one case—a history provided him by the company—Baier says the engineer was 38, had no previous record of neurological abnormality, but was hospitalized in 1969 after six months of severe headaches and olfactory hallucinations. At craniotomy, Baier continues, surgeons found fibrous tissue in the left frontal lobe they diagnosed as astrocytoma. The man later died.

According to Baier, his division was alerted back in 1969 by an anonymous phone call. But when a team was dispatched to the plant, it was barred from the area for security reasons.

All that is needed to further deepen the mystery is the involvement of a super-secret U.S. intelligence agency. The equipment the 23 engineers worked on appears to be an electronic detection system ordered by the National Security Agency, which monitors worldwide communications.

The U.S. Bureau of Radiological Health was first notified of the matter in 1970 by one of its consultants, engineer Rexford Daniels. "I was at a meeting in Philadelphia when some of my colleagues expressed concern about possible radiation results at a certain plant," he recalls. "As soon as I re-

ported these fears to Washington, I was told an investigation would be made—but not by me." Daniels feels the Philadelphia affair may be only part of a larger probe into radiation effects. "I know that the National Research Council of Canada, and several agencies overseas, are looking into the possibility that a new variable in electromagnetic radiation may modulate the 'alpha' rhythms of the human body. It could be that this variable was present in the Philadelphia facility."

Philco-Ford, however, insists that radiation is no problem at the plant, that the two astrocytoma cases are no more than a "statistical curiosity," and that fears among electronics men are simply the result of rumors.

But a comparison of the incidence in the plant population with national rates could indicate something "statistically significant," says Dr. Shiro Tanaka of the occupational health division. Dr. Tanaka declines to suggest any link between the secret project and astrocytoma, though, noting that it's "a ticklish situation."

The source of the radiation is described as a device somewhat along the lines of those used to determine which TV channels are being received in private homes. It has also been likened to a microwave direction-finder.

The little that is known—or claimed, inferred, suggested, hinted, and denied—has aroused interest among other companies employing the same equipment, according to engineer Daniels. But for now, the entire matter has been placed under what Baier calls "nine-blanket security—or maybe more." ■

Astrocytoma, present here in the right cerebral hemisphere, is infiltrative; sources of information about incidence at a certain plant are uncommunicative.

