

Chernobyl's myths and misconceptions



by Kalman Mizsei and Louisa Vinton

The twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident of April 26, 1986 is prompting a new wave of alarmist claims about its impact on human health and the environment.

As has become a ritual on such commemorative occasions, the death toll is tallied in the hundreds of thousands, and fresh reports are made of elevated rates of cancer, birth defects, and overall mortality.

This picture is both badly distorted - and harmful to the victims of the Chernobyl accident. All reputable scientific studies conducted so far have concluded that the impact of radiation has been less damaging than was feared. A few dozen emergency workers who battled the fire at the reactor succumbed to acute radiation sickness. Studies are still under way into elevated rates of cancer, cataracts, and cardiovascular disease among the "liquidators" who worked at the reactor site in the months following the accident. And some 5,000 cases of thyroid cancer, attributed to radioactive iodine absorbed through consumption of milk in the weeks immediately following the accident, have been detected among those who were children at the time.

There has been real suffering, particularly among the 330,000 people who were relocated after the accident. About that there is no doubt. But, for the five million people living in affected regions who are designated as Chernobyl "victims", radiation has had no discernable impact on physical health.

This is because these people were exposed to low radiation doses that in most cases were comparable to natural background levels. Two decades of natural decay and remediation measures mean that most territories originally deemed "contaminated" no longer merit that label. Aside from thyroid cancer, which has been successfully treated in 98.5% of cases, scientists have not been able to document any connection between radiation and any physical condition.

Where a clear impact *has* been found is mental health. Fear of radiation, it seems, poses a far more potent health threat than does radiation itself. Symptoms of stress are rampant, and many residents of affected areas firmly believe themselves to be condemned by radiation to ill health and early death.

In part, this is because the initial Soviet response was secretive: Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader at the time, addressed the issue on television only weeks later, on May 14, 1986. Myths and misconceptions have taken root, and these have outlasted subsequent efforts to provide reliable information. Combined with sweeping government benefit policies that classify millions of people living in Chernobyl-affected areas as invalids, such myths encouraged fatalistic and passive behaviors and created a "culture of dependency" among affected communities.

The United Nations Chernobyl Forum, a consortium of eight UN agencies and representatives of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, reinforced these findings. Chernobyl Forum was created to address the prevailing confusion concerning the impact of the accident, both among the public and government officials, by declaring a clear verdict on issues where a scientific consensus could be found. The Forum succeeded in this effort, and a fresh and reassuring message on the impact of radiation was made public in September. [An easily digestible summary is available at <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Booklets/Chernobyl/chernobyl.pdf>.]

The Chernobyl Forum findings should have brought relief, for they show that the specter haunting the region is not invincible radiation, but conquerable poverty. What the region needs are policies aimed at generating new livelihoods rather than reinforcing dependency; public-health campaigns that address the lifestyle issues (smoking and drinking) that undermine health across the former Soviet Union; and community development initiatives that promote self-reliance and a return to normalcy.

But the reception given to the Chernobyl Forum's message has been surprisingly mixed. Some officials have reverted to alarmist language on the number of fatalities attributed to Chernobyl. Some NGO's and Chernobyl charities have responded with disbelief, citing as evidence the general population's admittedly poor health. Opponents of nuclear power suggest that self-interest has compromised the Chernobyl Forum's integrity.

Set against the impressive body of science underpinning the Chernobyl Forum, such responses reflect the tenacity not only of myths and misconceptions, but also of vested interests. The new view on Chernobyl threatens the existence of charities - such as those offering health "respites" abroad for children - that depend for their fund-raising on graphic footage of deformed babies.

The new understanding also deprives the region's officials of a routine way to seek international sympathy, even if the repetition of such appeals after two decades yields little financial aid. By misstating the problems, these approaches threaten to divert scarce resources into the wrong remedies.

The twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl accident is an ideal occasion for all actors to do some honest soul-searching. Governments are right to worry about the fate of Chernobyl-affected territories, but the way forward will require fresh thinking and bold decisions, particularly a shift in priorities from paying paltry benefits to millions to targeted spending that helps to promote jobs and economic growth. Similarly, charities are right to worry about the population's health, but they should focus on promoting healthy lifestyles in affected communities rather than whisking children abroad as if their homes were poisonous.

All parties are right to worry about the affected populations, but, more than any sophisticated diagnostic equipment, what is needed is credible information, presented in a digestible format, to counter Chernobyl's destructive legacy of fear. The children of Chernobyl are all grown up; their interests, and those of their own children, are best served not by continually evoking the nightmare of radiation, but by giving them the tools and authority they need to rebuild their own communities.

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International Atomic Energy Agency on "Chernobyl 20 years Later":
<http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/Chernobyl/index.html>

World Health Organization press release on Chernobyl:
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2006/pr20/en/index.html>

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