

Case of the disappearing Dounreay safeguards

Sir,—The United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority is to build a £200 million plant to reprocess fast-reactor fuel from Britain, France and Germany, probably at Dounreay (Guardian, September 20). Will the plant be under any safeguards?

Dounreay already has a small reprocessing plant for fuel from the prototype fast reactor (PFR). The annual reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency, for 1980 and 1981, show both the reactor and its reprocessing plant as being under IAEA safeguards. The annual reports for 1982 and 1983 show neither the reactor nor the reprocessing plant as being under IAEA safeguards. It seems that the PFR and its reprocessing plant have been withdrawn from safeguards.

One of us has written to the IAEA to ask why these two facilities have been withdrawn from safeguards; we have received no reply. Earlier this year the other of us wrote several letters to the

director of Dounreay in regard to the plutonium produced by the PFR; we have received no reply.

Recently we visited the retrospective exhibition, UKAEA 30 years 1954-1984, held on the respectable and solid premises of the Royal Society. Liquids of several psychedelic colours bubbled and gurgled to illustrate the Dounreay reprocessing plant. There were buttons to press. We asked the exhibition staff if the Dounreay reprocessing plant was under safeguards. Knowledgeable about everything else, they only "thought it was."

The inspector at the Sizewell Inquiry has recently called for greater candour from two principal witnesses, the Central Electricity Generating Board, and the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate.

There is a similar need for candour by the UKAEA in regard to the reprocessing of fast-reactor fuels, and other

matters. Why has the PFR and its reprocessing plant been withdrawn from safeguards?

We all know that fast reactors produce plutonium of a quality which is ideal for nuclear weapons. We know that the French and the Americans use their fast reactors to produce plutonium for weapons. Why has the British fast reactor been withdrawn from safeguards?—

Yours sincerely,
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Sir,—Karl Popper has shown that a scientific hypothesis can never be "proved correct" or "confirmed"; it can only be refuted by test or experiment.

Therefore anyone who asserts that the hypothetical link between Sellafield nuclear waste discharge and the occurrence of leukaemia nearby is "not proven" is

either disingenuous or ignorant of Popperian methodology, because the alleged link can never logically be proved to exist. Nevertheless, even tautological assertions carry a lot of weight when uttered by eminent scientists such as Sir Douglas Black.

The 'Black Report, using unscientific methodology, has effectively let British Nuclear Fuels Ltd off the hook, whatever the statistics—and our common sense—may be trying to tell us to the contrary. The statistics are now compelling: corrections to the report by A. Pomiankowski (Nature, September 13) show that there is now only a one in a million chance that the observed incidence of child cancer in Seascale is random. This means that we must categorically reject the "random" hypothesis, and urgently seek another.

The alternative hypothesis that "radionuclide discharges from Sellafield cause

childhood leukaemias nearby" is bold, testable, and scientifically sound. If BNFL and its nuclear industry friends don't like the accepted methodology, it is for them to try to refute it, and at the same time replace it with another one to account for the observed morbidity.

Until such time as they do so, the hypothesis stands, albeit provisionally, as all scientific hypotheses do. Contrary to legal custom, therefore, Sellafield must be considered "guilty" of causing cancer, until it can prove itself innocent.

Sir Douglas Black and his colleagues now have a duty to amend their conclusions, not least by bringing them within the sphere of scientific methodology, and thereby dissociate themselves from the "not proven" sophistry of the nuclear industry lobby.—Yours faithfully,

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