

Don't let fear-mongers interfere with safe nuclear power

By: Letty Lutzker, M.D.

Re The recent press briefing in Manhattan by the Radiation and Public Health Project, which, citing its own research, stated that the "rate of thyroid cancer cases in counties closest to the Indian Point nuclear plant ... are the highest in New York state, and among the highest in the U.S.":

The antinuclear fear-mongers are at it again, with scare stories about nuclear power plants causing cancer. For decades they have been circulating the myth that radioactive isotopes from these plants can be found in baby teeth, proving that they are responsible for epidemics of pediatric cancer.

Such claims have been refuted by state and federal health departments, epidemiologists at major universities, the American Cancer Society, and the National Cancer Institute.

Now Joseph Mangano, a nuclear critic who has made most of the tooth-fairy allegations, claims there is a greater incidence of thyroid cancer in New Jersey, New York and eastern Pennsylvania counties, caused by their neighboring nuclear plants.

Regrettably, such a campaign of vilification, preying on the fear of a dreaded disease in order to stigmatize nuclear power, diverts resources from addressing real public health problems and from dealing with our increasing energy needs.

Over the past decades, nuclear power in the United States has been proven environmentally benign and reliable.

Nuclear plants in the mid-Atlantic region have solid safety records, and the productivity of the plants has grown dramatically. To meet the need for electricity and help power our region's economic turnaround, the Indian Point plant in Buchanan and the Hope Creek and Salem plants in New Jersey have applied to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to have their operating licenses renewed.

Since 2000, U.S. nuclear plants, on average, have produced electricity 90 percent of the time, without emitting pollution. The plants generate a large amount of "base-load" electricity from a small amount of fuel, and are an indispensable source of clean energy for millions of homes and businesses.

As for nuclear waste, it has largely become a nonissue with negligible environmental impact. Used nuclear fuel can be stored safely on-site in concrete-and-steel canisters for several hundred years — or until we decide whether to recycle the nuclear material or agree on a long-term disposal site.

France, which obtains 80 percent of its electricity from nuclear power, recycles its used fuel, safely and efficiently. The United States can leapfrog France by developing even more efficient recycling technology that is proliferation-proof.

Not only is nuclear energy safe and reliable, but today's operating nuclear plants typically produce electricity less expensively than either coal or natural gas. But the cost of building new reactors is high, and they take six years or more to complete.

The daunting task ahead is to get nuclear plants built and operating in time to help meet the projected growth in demand for electricity, even with energy-efficiency improvements.

The greatest public health threat we could face is a shortage of the electricity that is the lifeblood of a modern society.

The stakes for our region — and the nation — are very high. We cannot be paralyzed by the fear-mongers.

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