

# Nuclear Fallout Victim?

By Walter Sullivan

NEW YORK—The first known death from a disorder typical of radiation exposure has occurred among those subjected to heavy fallout from nuclear weapons tests.

The victim was a 19-year-old Rongelap islander named Leko Anjain, who died last Wednesday of leukemia at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., after an intensive effort to stem rapid progress of the disease with chemicals.

Anjain was one of 64 inhabitants of Rongelap atoll subjected in 1954 to a "snowfall" of fresh, heavy fallout from a hydrogen bomb explosion over Bikini atoll, 100 miles to the west.

OVER THE YEARS the Pacific islanders have continued to display apparent effects of their exposure. Two of them, for example, were operated on in Cleveland recently to remove thyroid nodules, which have been a typical manifestation. But until now none had contracted leukemia, which is known to be, in some cases, a long-delayed consequence of radiation exposure.

It is estimated that, of some 284,000 survivors of the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about 100 have died of leukemia who would not have done so, had they not been exposed to radiation from the bombs.

Since 1950 the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission—a Japanese-American agency—has been following somewhat less than 100,000 of these people. From their histories the total leukemia deaths have been estimated at 330, compared to 230 to be expected in a normal population of equal size.

ACCORDING TO Dr. Gilbert W. Beebe of the National Research Council, a participant in the study, the incidence reached its peak seven or eight years after the bomb blasts. However, he said, it cannot yet be said to have returned to normal.

Dr. Robert A. Conard, a specialist in radiation effects at Brookhaven National Laboratory, and his colleagues have been paying periodic visits to check on the health of the Rongelap islanders. Rongelap atoll is a necklace of 61 islets in the Marshall Islands.

The most obvious effect of the exposure, Conard said, has been the development of thyroid nodules. They have been removed surgically and often found to be of a harmless type. On the last visit, in September, Leko Anjain was found to have a somewhat depressed count of white blood corpuscles.

A FOLLOW-UP test showed an even lower count and he was flown to Brookhaven, where the diagnosis was myelogenous leukemia. A hospital plane took him to Bethesda where the most advanced chemical therapy was administered.

He shared a room, at the clinical center of the National Institutes of Health, with Stewart Alsop, the columnist, who was in with lobar pneumonia. Alsop's Oct. 30 column in *Newsweek* magazine was on "Leko and the Unusable Weapon."

CONARD POINTED OUT that it is never possible to fix the blame for the onset of a disease like leukemia. However, he said the chances were "fairly good" that in this case it was due to fallout exposure.

The explosion that showered fallout on Rongelap was the same that rained such material on the Japanese fishing vessel, Lucky Dragon. However, according to Conard, none of the 23 men on board have died of radiation-related disease. The device fired over Bikini was reportedly the first deliverable hydrogen bomb.

The fallout began on Rongelap some four or five hours after the explosion and continued for 10 or 12 hours. The primary exposure was from particles emitting gamma rays so penetrating that the location of a person, indoors or outdoors, probably made little difference in his exposure, Conard said.

SUCH "CLOSE-IN" fallout is particularly dangerous because it is still rich in material that decays rapidly and becomes harmless within a few hours. The total exposure of the islanders was believed to have been 175 rads (a dosage unit) which, Conard added, had not been expected to produce a high leukemia incidence.

In addition to those at Rongelap and aboard the Lucky Dragon, 18 on Ailingne island were also exposed, but the doses were estimated at only about 69 rads. Any dose in excess of 600 rads is considered almost invariably fatal.

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