



Lethal Legacy

Written by Liz Campbell



New Zealand Features writer Elizabeth Campbell gives a personal perspective on the effects of dioxin pollution on residents of Paritutu in idyllic Taranaki.

Driving along the scene-stealing coastal road of New Zealand's, New Plymouth BackBeach, you'd never know that a silent killer permeated the air and soil between the mid to late 60s until the late 80s, leaving a lethal legacy for generations to come.

Locals will tell you that in some areas every household has been affected; but for years, despite the mounting weight of evidence, health authorities vehemently denied there was a problem. That is until recently, when the New Zealand Government finally admitted there

was a problem. Moves have now been taken to assist the families who are dealing with health problems spanning, in some cases, four generations. But is it too little too late? A recent visit home, which should have been joyful and fun, turned into a dreadful reminder of a situation I have tried not to think about over the years, but now realise this story must be told as often as possible to honour those whose suffering has been hidden, and in the hope that it will reduce the chances of it happening again, somewhere else.

During this trip I caught up with three women I had gone to high school with. As the four of us sat down to chat we did the usual, "and what's so and so doing?" only to find that a large percentage of our peers, including one of us, were either dead, had lost babies, their babies were born with birth defects, or they had some serious health problem. So how did this all come about?

The lucky generation?

We were part of the lucky generation where anything seemed possible, and the only spectre on our horizon was the Vietnam War, and as we were all at high school it was not really a personal issue unless a member of our family was over there. Or so we thought.

We lived in the suburb of Paritutu, in New Plymouth, Taranaki; an idyllic place that offered great surf beaches and a magnificent mountain at our back door. It was a fantastic place to grow up, and we made the most of it. We swam and surfed at Back Beach on our rugged West Coast, it was our favourite hang out after school. We weren't concerned about the slimy orange outfall from the once beautiful Herekawe Stream, and didn't think too much about it other than to miss the whitebait we used to catch. There was the smell from the chemical factory across the road, but we were used to that, as many of us lived in the environs of the plant.

This company manufactured 245T and 24D, chemicals that were used extensively throughout New Zealand to clear gorse. A by-product of these chemicals is Dioxin, one of the most toxic substances on the planet. Dioxin is so toxic, levels are measured in parts per trillion.

During the Vietnam War we were led to believe they were shipping these chemicals, the constituents of Agent Orange, to Vietnam, and although the Government of New Zealand and the chemical plant denied for many years that Agent Orange was manufactured at this plant, it was common knowledge they were producing defoliant of which the components were made in New Plymouth and mixed together in Vietnam.

These days we would be aware of the signs to raise concern, but at that time we had no terms of reference to warn us of the danger. Several times a week we would arrive home from school to be assailed by the chemical stench. This smell permeated everything; washing on the line, our skin, and it even rotted curtains hanging in our homes. One of the most memorable signs for me was the masses of foam coming from the Herekawe Stream after a high tide or storms. This foam floated around the streets in great clouds, like something out of a Sci-Fi movie, and children played in it thinking it was bubble bath. When this foam landed on the lawn it left brown dead grass and



at times it even damaged the paint on cars. It has always astonished me that the foam is seldom mentioned in articles about the contamination.

Our parents trusted the government, trusted the scientists, believed that the Americans were the good guys, and didn't question. They were proud of our city's part in the war effort, after all the chemicals just took the leaves off the trees so that our troops could see the enemy; we had no idea of the devastating effect Dioxin would have on the Vietnamese, our returning servicemen and ourselves. It is a reflection of the times. We were naive about international politics and people took things very much on face value.

My first memory that something was wrong was when the Carnation Flower Farm at the end of our road suddenly lost all their plant stock. The owner started asking difficult questions, denials were made and we were reassured that there wasn't a problem. In later years this family has been seriously affected by health problems common to those who worked at the plant and the other businesses nearby.

Birth defects

I moved away from the area and didn't think anything about it again until my best friend from high school lost a baby to cancer. She'd had twins; one of whom died shortly after birth, her poor little body devastated by cancer before she had even drawn breath. I was later to learn that there were eight pairs of twins born over a two month period in the region, and my friends surviving daughter was the only one of those 16 babies to live. It was postulated that it might have something to do with spraying along the coast.

Soon stories started to circulate about all the birth defects. In the late 60s a matron at the maternity hospital was deeply concerned about the increase of babies being born in Taranaki with horrific birth defects. She documented these instances and presented six years of data to the health authorities. The response was a denial, it was unlikely there was a problem in the area, and the information forwarded was more likely to be due to her meticulous record-keeping. Nothing was done!

There were reports of illegal dumping of waste from the plant in or close to residential areas. There were continual cases of birth defects with apparent links to spraying of 245T and 24D. Yet regardless of signs to the contrary both the Company and the health authorities continued to deny there was the slightest possibility of a problem.

Then we began to notice that many of the people we knew were sick, with symptoms similar to those who had returned from Vietnam. There were clusters of cancer and leukaemia in the area and at times it seemed that there was someone seriously ill in every family, especially those homes that were in the path of the westerly winds. Many of the men who worked in the plant and their families were by now experiencing affects of exposure to Dioxin that was crossing generations. Still the Government was in denial.

When I returned to New Zealand in the late 90s I discovered the Department of Health was testing past residents for Dioxin levels, but as a lot of us were no longer living in Taranaki, or even New Zealand for that matter, it was difficult to see how any data resulting from these tests could be conclusive unless a concerted effort was made to trace former residents and test them, and of course what about those who were already dead? Also not all those who applied were accepted for the trials, my friend and a neighbour who had lost babies were among those who applied but were not chosen to be tested.

Two years ago my friend sent me an email to tell me she had Bowel Cancer, we talked about our days at Back Beach; the smell, the foam, stealing fresh peas and tomatoes from both our father's gardens and eating them in the sun as the westerly winds blew the cloud of toxins from the chemical plant overhead. We talked about real estate values plummeting and people having to declare the Dioxin levels in the soil before selling their homes and then we talked about the dead and the dying.

She told me a Group had been set up to fight for help for the families worst affected (Chemically Exposed Paritutu Residents Association. CEPRA), run by people who had the courage to stand up and face the overwhelming machine of denial, one of whom was her cousin who had worked at the site and was now crippled with MS. I contacted that Group and discovered things that broke my heart about people I grew up with or knew.



Let us spray

In late 2007, New Zealand's TV3 channel put to air a documentary titled "Let Us Spray" by award winning journalist Melanie Reid; I was back in Perth but thanks to the wonders of the internet was able to watch it online. What I saw left me enraged and stunned at the complicity between the chemical plant and the New Zealand Government to cover up this issue. The documentary clearly shows that all were aware that Dioxin would cause severe systemic problems as shown by an internal memo and yet they continued to produce these chemicals, with a Government subsidy into the late 80s.



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The documentary team also discovered that the findings of The Ministry of Health Report on Dioxin poisoning were seriously flawed when they had the results checked by a forensic accountant. The re-calibrated results showed that instead of the Dioxin levels of Paritutu residents being 4 times the national average, as indicated by the report, they were in fact closer to 7 times the national average.

It is not within the scope of this article to go into the complexity of this information, but I recommend anyone who has lived in the area or lives in areas with Dioxin contamination, to view the documentary.

I suggested to my friend that she write her story and that of those she knew, but she no longer had the energy or the emotional strength to do so. At the time of writing she was sitting in Palmerston North receiving radiation treatment and there were four others with her who had lived in Paritutu.

So I am writing my version of the story, my friend's would have been more powerful as she has lived in the area all her life and remembers those who have gone and their stories.

Researching this has been a sobering exercise because the people involved are not strangers in a news item; they are friends and acquaintances from my youth. I opened one article to discover the story of a woman I had worked with and who was my mentor and friend when I was in my 20s. She lived in the path of the westerly winds and her husband, a strapping wharfie, wasted away from a rare form of cancer. This lovely woman is experiencing nerve damage to her legs and is fearfully asking whether there is Dioxin in her system, and what effect this will have on her great grandchildren.

The people of Paritutu have been marginalised and vilified by health authorities and the local media for years. Those I have spoken to don't want massive compensation payments, they just want recognition of their plight, and for someone to stand up and admit that they knew the risks to public health but continued to produce this deadly chemical in our backyard even after the rest of the world banned it. They want to know that their health needs will be taken care of, and be reassured that their descendants will be looked after and won't have to fight for recognition.

This situation is not unique, it happens all over the world in one form or another. How long will our governments protect multinational companies who disregard public safety? How long will people be left to struggle with the effects of corporate irresponsibility? How long before there will be accountability?

The message is loud and clear. We cannot rely on governments to do the right thing, they have been known to put



the economy before public health, and we certainly can't depend on the multinationals to care about our health. So when they come riding into your town promising jobs and prosperity to the community, remember the people of Paritutu; look closer and speak out when you see the risks or if all else fails, move to somewhere else.



About the author:

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