

Irradiated Mail May Contribute To Hill Workers' Ailments, Study Finds

By Noella Kertes, CQ Staff Writer

July 2, 2002 - Handling irradiated mail over a long period could contribute to the symptoms including headaches, burning eyes and nausea reported by some Capitol Hill workers, the Congressional Office of Compliance concluded in a report issued Tuesday.

The report recommends further studies to determine whether there could be long-term adverse effects on employee health.

"We have found that the symptoms persist, although they are in fewer number now," said Gary Green, general counsel of the compliance office, who added that the symptoms were also milder. "They persist, and this raises cause for concern that we think warrants further study."

The office found that 72 percent of the 215 employees who responded to a survey were experiencing symptoms during March and April. A follow-up survey in May found more than half of those respondents still experiencing symptoms, although often in milder form.

The complaints included headaches, itching skin, burning and red eyes, nausea, rashes and bloody noses. "The symptoms very often get better as soon as they go home [and] get away from the mail room," Green said.

The report concludes that "handling irradiated mail for substantial periods of time may be the cause, or a contributing cause, of adverse health symptoms."

The study was prompted by a request from Sen. Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa, and two House employees. Grassley warned Tuesday that irradiating the mail was still "a big experiment," and pointed out that other inquiries, including one by the Senate Sergeant at Arms Legislative Mail Task Force, may have been too hasty in concluding the process is harmless.

"Irradiating mail is an important security procedure, but we have to fully investigate its effects to ensure it doesn't present its own dangers," Grassley said. "As this report makes clear, we still don't have all the answers."

Senate Sergeant at Arms Alfonso E. Lenhardt on Tuesday defended the findings of a previous report issued in April by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). "All of our findings say that the mail is safe," Lenhardt said in an interview Tuesday. "This is not Lenhardt speaking, these are the experts. This is the NIOSH report."

Scientists at NIOSH found little or no indication of air contamination from irradiated mail in the Capitol complex after taking air samples from all six Senate and House office buildings, postal facilities and the Capitol, and interviewing 389 individuals, some of whom had reported symptoms.

“I think we have to be very careful that we don’t unduly alarm and cause the congressional community not to have faith in the safety of the mail,” Lenhardt said, adding that the Legislative Mail Task Force would continue to monitor the mail situation and the safety of employees.

Meanwhile, compliance office officials said they do not believe there is any immediate danger of serious health problems. But they said the persistence of symptoms warrants additional studies such as a workplace exposure assessment to determine whether particular chemical byproducts could represent a serious health hazard. They also urged medical evaluation of employees who continue to show symptoms.

“We can’t do, especially on our small budget, the studies that are required,” Green said. “We’re going to ask the Congress to do that.”

Green refused to say how much additional money he will request. His office is funded through the annual legislative branch appropriations law.

The Office of Compliance is charged with applying 11 civil rights, labor and workplace laws to employees in the legislative branch. The office was created by the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995 (PL 104-1).

The Postal Service has been irradiating mail bound for Capitol Hill since anthrax was discovered in a letter delivered to the Hart Senate Office Building last fall.

Compliance office officials pointed out that this is the first time that a large number of employees has been regularly exposed to irradiated mail. “We certainly hope that irradiation is the answer to anthrax, or an answer,” Green said. “But until the additional studies are done, I think questions will remain.”

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