

DOCUMENT RESUME

03498 - [A2693868]

[Working Conditions for the Specimen Handling Activity of the National Human Monitoring Program for Pesticides]. B-133192. September 20, 1977. 3 pp.

Report to Douglas M. Costle, Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency; by Wilbur D. Campbell, Associate Director, Community and Economic Development Div.

Issue Area: Consumer and Worker Protection (900).  
Contact: Community and Economic Development Div.  
Budget Function: Health (550).

Employees of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) handle specimens of human fatty tissue, blood serum, and urine in an office of the East Tower, EPA Headquarters. This office does not have adequate space or the proper equipment to provide a safe workplace. An accident, though remote, could endanger not only the employees of this particular office, but many others working in the building. The specimen handling activity is part of the National Human Monitoring Program for Pesticides in the Ecological Monitoring Branch of the Technical Services Division. The office has operated in the building since 1973.

Findings/Conclusions: During November 1976 EPA's Occupational Safety and Health staff inspected the operation and recommended that, because of the potential health hazard associated with specimen samples, a variety of actions be taken as soon as possible, including: provide personal protective clothing and equipment as needed; develop a standard operating procedure for emergencies; include personnel in an occupational health program immediately; separate the office from the general work area; provide laboratory exhaust hood or biological safety cabinet to prevent exposure of personnel to etiologic agents; and provide a one-pass air system for the activity to prevent the spread of etiologic agents to other areas via the ventilation system.

Recommendations: EPA should take immediate steps to either provide the space and equipment recommended by the hygienists or move the operation to a suitable laboratory where there are more appropriate facilities to handle and store the specimen samples.

(SC)



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

SEP 20 1977

B-133192

The Honorable Douglas M. Costle  
Administrator, Environmental  
Protection Agency

Dear Mr. Costle:

During our current work in the Office of Pesticide Programs, we found that EPA employees handle specimens of human fatty tissue, blood serum, and urine in an office in the East Tower, EPA Headquarters. This office does not have adequate space or the proper equipment to provide a safe workplace. We believe that this matter warrants your immediate attention. An accident, though remote, could endanger not only the employees of this particular office but many others working in the building.

The specimen handling activity is part of the National Human Monitoring Program for Pesticides in the Ecological Monitoring Branch of the Technical Services Division. It has operated in the building since 1973 when it was moved from EPA's laboratory at Beltsville, Maryland. The receiving room collects specimen samples from participating pathologists and medical examiners throughout the United States and then forwards them to laboratories for pesticide analysis.

During November 1976 EPA's Occupational Safety and Health staff inspected the operation and recommended that, because of the potential health hazard associated with specimen samples, the following actions be taken as soon as possible.

1. Provide personal protective clothing and equipment as needed. Impervious rubber or plastic gloves should always be worn when handling specimen samples.
2. Develop a standard operating procedure for emergencies such as spillage, etc.

03498

3. Include personnel in an occupational health program immediately. Provide baseline physicals and needed immunizations.
4. Separate the office from the general work area. The work area must be completely isolated from office personnel.
5. Provide separate receipt, logging, and storage areas for samples and sample containers.
6. Prevent eating, drinking, and smoking by personnel in work area.
7. Provide laboratory exhaust hood or biological safety cabinet with sufficient exhaust ventilation to prevent exposure of personnel to etiologic agents.
8. Disinfect all materials in laboratory exhaust hood or biological safety cabinet.
9. Provide personnel washing facilities separate from public restrooms.
10. Provide an autoclave for sterilization of contaminated materials.
11. Provide a one-pass air system for the activity to prevent spread of etiologic agents to other areas via the ventilation system.

In August 1977 we accompanied an EPA industrial hygienist contractor during a reinspection of the facility. The contractor generally concurred with the recommendations of the EPA Occupational Safety and Health staff. The contractor told us routine operating procedures are now generally adequate. However, he said he will recommend additional measures concerning specimen package delivery, mail room handling, and trash disposal procedures. He further said that emergency procedures will not be adequate until the equipment called for in recommendations 7-10 is added. He did not believe, however, that the special one-pass air system is needed if all other recommendations are followed.

Because most of the recommendations involve space, equipment, or structural changes which have not yet been implemented, we looked into what progress has been made and what needs to be done. We learned that the Office of Pesticide

Programs had requested (1) \$23,000 of special funding to pay for the recommended equipment and supplies, excepting the special air handling system, and (2) additional office space. We understand that final decisions on these requests were planned to be made during September 1977 and if approved would allow for implementation of the recommendations during fiscal year 1978.

The specimen receiving operation has been located in the East Tower for about 4 years. Almost 10 months have passed since the Occupational Safety and Health staff made its recommendations concerning needed improvements in the operation. Although some of the improvements have been made, many important ones have not. We believe that EPA should take immediate steps to either provide the space and equipment recommended by the hygienists or move the operation to a suitable laboratory where there are more appropriate facilities to handle and store the specimen samples.

Last year we recommended improvements needed to insure safe and healthful working conditions for all EPA laboratory employees (Health Monitoring Needed for Laboratory Employees, CED-76-160, October 8, 1976). At that time the Assistant Administrator for Planning and Management stressed EPA's firm commitment to a strong and effective health and safety program. We believe timely correction of the deficiencies in the specimen receiving operation are in concert with this commitment.

We would appreciate being advised at an early date regarding the actions planned to correct the deficiencies in the specimen receiving operation.

Sincerely yours,

  
Wilbur D. Campbell  
Associate Director