

## THREE MILE ISLAND REVISITED

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The report of the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island is prefaced by the pronouncement, "On March 28, 1979, the United States experienced the worst accident in the history of commercial nuclear power generation." More than any other single event, the accident at Three Mile Island proved dramatically--and abruptly--that the Pennsylvania Department of Health lacked the tools to deal with the extraordinarily serious health consequences that occurred during and after this emergency. Fortunately, only low levels of radiation reached the off-site population, and the Commission reported that "there will be no detectable additional cases of cancer, developmental abnormalities, or genetic ill health."

That is the good news. Now, let me tell you the bad news about Pennsylvania's readiness for the TMI accident, and perhaps the next nuclear emergency. On day one, just 12 days after being sworn in as Secretary of Health, I found a woeful lack of public health preparedness at the state and national levels. That condition prevails today. In the Department of Health, there was no Bureau of Radiation Health, no office of Mental Health, not even a book on radiation medicine--the medical library had been disbanded for budgetary reasons two years earlier. In short, the Department of Health had little or no capability to deal with this extraordinarily serious emergency.

On the second day, because of wildly conflicting reports about the levels of radiation emissions, I recommended in the strongest possible terms that the governor call for the evacuation of pregnant women and young children from an area within five miles of the disabled plant. The state's nuclear engineers did not agree with me, so a nonmedical decision was accepted.

On the third day, the endorsement of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Chairman, Joseph Hendrie, a nuclear power engineer, finally convinced the Governor to issue his evacuation directive. Hendrie said, "If my wife were pregnant,...I would get (her) out. Because we don't know what is going to happen." Isn't that interesting? A physician's warning of potential health effects from radiation goes unheeded while an engineer's warning is accepted. Certainly, an Alice In Wonderland approach to sound public health practice!

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