

RUTHERFORD BUILDING INQUIRY

PRESS NOTICE

Wednesday 30 September

Professor David Coggon from the MRC Epidemiology Resource Centre, University of Southampton, is today presenting the findings of his independent inquiry into possible health risks from contamination of the Rutherford Building at the University of Manchester.

The investigation was carried out at the request of Professor Alan Gilbert, President of the University, in response to concerns that cases of cancer among former occupants of the Building might be related to its contamination by radioactive chemicals or mercury that had been used by Sir Ernest Rutherford and his colleagues in their research on radioactivity at the beginning of the 20th century.

Professor Coggon was assisted by teams of scientists from the Health Protection Agency's Radiological Protection Division and the Health and Safety Laboratory.

Professor Coggon said: "Despite some uncertainties about exact levels of contamination in the past, I think we can be pretty confident that any risks to health have been small, and that the cases of cancer that have occurred among former occupants of the Rutherford Building are not a consequence of the contamination."

He concludes that the largest potential health risk from contamination by radioactive chemicals would be for lung cancer in long-term past occupants of the most polluted rooms in the Building. However, even after allowance for uncertainties in the assessment of historical exposures to radiation, this risk is expected to be small (of similar order to the risk from passive smoking).

Excess risks of pancreatic and brain cancer will have been substantially less than those for lung cancer.

It is unlikely that pollution by mercury has caused any harm to health in the past 20 years, or will do so in the future. There is more uncertainty about possible risks from mercury contamination in earlier periods, but if higher exposures did occur in the past, any toxic effects are likely to have been relatively minor, and would have tended to resolve as exposures reduced.

An apparent cluster (at least three cases) of pancreatic cancer among past occupants of the Rutherford Building cannot plausibly be explained by contaminant radioactive chemicals, mercury or asbestos, either alone or in combination. By far the most likely explanation for the cluster is that it has occurred by chance coincidence.

Further details of Professor Coggon's findings are given in the summary of his provisional report, which is attached. The full report will be posted on the University of Manchester website (<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/rutherfordreview/>), and will be finalised once feedback and questions have been received from stakeholders.

Professor Coggon will be available to answer questions from the press today (Wednesday 30 September) at 3.30 pm in Room G16 of the Martin Harris Centre at the University of Manchester. Thereafter, he can be contacted via the University of Southampton press office on 023 8059 3212/8933.