

A Million Persons, a Million Dreams: A Vision for a National Center of Radiation Epidemiology And Biology

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Background: Epidemiologic studies of radiation-exposed populations form the basis for human safety standards. They also help shape public health policy and evidence-based health practices by identifying and quantifying health risks of exposure in defined populations. For more than a century, epidemiologists have studied the consequences of radiation exposures, yet the health effects of low levels delivered at a low-dose rate remain equivocal.

Materials and methods: The Million Person Study (MPS) of U.S. Radiation Workers and Veterans was designed to examine health effects following chronic exposures in contrast with brief exposures as experienced by the Japanese atomic bomb survivors. Radiation associations for rare cancers, intakes of radionuclides, and differences between men and women are being evaluated, as well as noncancers such as cardiovascular disease and conditions such as dementia and cognitive function. The first international symposium, held November 6, 2020, provided a broad overview of the MPS. Representatives from four U.S. government agencies addressed the importance of this research for their respective missions: U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The major components of the MPS were discussed and recent findings summarized. The importance of radiation dosimetry, an essential feature of each MPS investigation, was emphasized.

Results: The seven components of the MPS are DOE workers, nuclear weapons test participants, nuclear power plant workers, industrial radiographers, medical radiation workers, nuclear submariners, other U.S. Navy personnel, and radium dial painters. The MPS cohorts include tens of thousands of workers with elevated intakes of alpha particle emitters for which organ-specific doses are determined. Findings to date for chronic radiation exposure suggest that leukemia risk is lower than after acute exposure; lung cancer risk is much lower and there is little difference in risks between men and women; an increase in ischemic

heart disease is yet to be seen; esophageal cancer is frequently elevated but not myelodysplastic syndrome; and Parkinson's disease may be associated with radiation exposure.

Conclusions: The MPS has provided provocative insights into the possible range of health effects following low-level chronic radiation exposure. When the 34 MPS cohorts are completed and combined, a powerful evaluation of radiation-effects will be possible. This final article in the MPS special issue summarizes the findings to date and the possibilities for the future. A National Center for Radiation Epidemiology and Biology is envisioned. DOI: 10.1080/09553002.2021.1988183

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