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ABC NEWS

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HEADLINE: THE **DEADLY DUST;** THOUSANDS OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS WORKS EXPOSED TO BERYLLIUM DUST ARE SICK OR DYING

ANCHORS: CHARLES GIBSON; DIANE SAWYER

BODY:
THE **DEADLY DUST**

CHARLES GIBSON, co-host:

We turn now to a story that has been making national headlines recently, a story that was first reported by a Toledo, Ohio newspaper, the Blade. It is about people who sacrificed their health, in some cases, even their lives for their country, working in America's weapons programs. For years they made parts from a certain metal, were exposed to its dust, most never knowing how dangerous their work could be. And tens of thousands of people may still be facing danger unknowingly, workers in industries you'd never imagine because this same unique metal is used today in many products we all buy. Have we learned from the past? Is enough being done to protect new generations of workers from the dust? The dust that can take your breath away.

Mr. JOEL VAN DYKE: Got to catch it.

GIBSON: (VO) His name is Joel Van Dyke. Fifty-three years old, married, and he can't breathe.

Mr. VAN DYKE: When I first found out I had this, if I laid down for a couple hours at high altitude, I would get a splitting headache and I wasn't getting enough oxygen.

OK. I think we make it one more inch.

I was almost 30 years old and the doctor told me I had the lungs of an 80-year-old man.

Yeah.

GIBSON: (VO) Gary Renwand suffers from the same deadly disease. He is 62, a husband, a father and a grandfather. And he can't breathe either.

Mr. GARY RENWAND: I get disgusted with it. There's so many things I want to do that--that we want to do, my wife and I, and we just can't do it, you know? She won't go away because she's afraid something will happen to me while she's gone.

GIBSON: (VO) Gary Renwand and Joel Van Dyke both expect to die from their incurable lung disease. When they do, you can record them as victims of America's nuclear weapons program. Both men worked with beryllium, a critical component of America's nuclear arsenal since the dawn of the atomic age. It helps trigger bombs, it's used in fighter bombers and guided missiles. The metal is stronger than steel, lighter than aluminum. In solid form, it's no threat to anyone. But cut it or grind it, create beryllium dust, and those who breathe in the dust can get chronic beryllium disease...

Mr. VAN DYKE: I'll make it. Just got to...

GIBSON: (VO) ...CBD. At a minimum, 1200 people have gotten the disease over the years. Many have died.

Our story is about them and other workers who may have become sick because of a deal between the government and the industry that insured a steady supply of beryllium for American weapons. It is also about the threat that beryllium dust may pose to tens of thousands of American workers today who make not bombs, but common consumer products.

Mr. SAM ROE: The factory worker called me up and basically said, 'I'm dying out here.'

GIBSON: (VO) Sam Roe is an investigative reporter at the Toledo Blade and the first journalist to break the beryllium story. He spent nearly two years developing sources and collecting thousands of pages of confidential documents.

Mr. ROE: These people were continually overexposed to unsafe levels of beryllium dust. This happened time and time again for these people and they went on to get sick and they die.

Dr. LEE NEWMAN: It's probably one of the most hazardous of the metals.

GIBSON: (VO) Dr. Lee Newman is a lung specialist in Denver at the National Jewish Medical Center and an expert on chronic beryllium disease.

Mr. NEWMAN: By breathing it in, the immune system comes in with an army of cells to react against it. You unfortunately end up trashing the battlefield and that battlefield is your lung.

GIBSON: (VO) And that's what happened to Gary Renwand. He worked here at the Brush Wellman beryllium factory in Elmore, Ohio, the largest beryllium producer in America.

(OC) Could you see it? Are you at all conscious of the fact that you are breathing it in?

Mr. RENWAND: I--It leaves a taste in your mouth. You got a--it's like a sweet taste in your mouth and, you know, you kind of taste it. And as far as breathing it in, there's no smell to it really.

GIBSON: (VO) Doctors don't know why some people are more susceptible to beryllium dust than others, and the amount of dust that might make a person sick is the subject of scientific debate. But if you are susceptible, it's devastating.

Mr. ROE: I mean, imagine if you just held your hand over your mouth and nose like this and tried to breathe. Imagine doing that for the rest of your life. I mean, that's what these people have to go through. And it gets harder and harder as time goes on.

GIBSON: (VO) These are movies of Gary Renwand years ago, active in sports, camping, travel.

Offscreen Voice: I suppose he'll take another nap.

GIBSON: (VO) Today, he doesn't go anywhere and is constantly hooked up to an oxygen tank.

(VO) What's the lifestyle like? You have this thing on all the time?

Mr. RENWAND: Twenty-four hours a day.

GIBSON: When you go to the store?

Mr. RENWAND: Yeah. I've got to have the oxygen.

GIBSON: When you go to a movie?

Mr. RENWAND: Oh, yeah.

GIBSON: To a restaurant?

Mr. RENWAND: Yeah.

GIBSON: Anything that requires any kind of exertion.

Mr. RENWAND: Right.

Mr. VAN DYKE: Well, that's the matter there, Teet. It's probably about empty.

GIBSON: (VO) The same for Joel Van Dyke. Oxygen 24 hours a day. He never worked for Brush Wellman, but got CBD working for a company that used Brush's beryllium to make missile parts. And he's now suing Brush Wellman, saying he was never told the extent of the danger.

Mr. BILL RICHARDSON: In those days, the objective was make as many bombs as fast as possible.

GIBSON: (VO) Bill Richardson is secretary of the Department of Energy and currently responsible for America's nuclear weapons program.

Mr. RICHARDSON: I think it's one of the saddest chapters in this agency's history because basically, the Department of Energy was saying our own workers have to produce nuclear weapons, but if there's any contamination, we have nothing to do with it.

GIBSON: The government knew factory workers were getting sick and dying from beryllium dust as early as 1949 and so it set a safety standard for beryllium workers. They could be exposed to no more than an average of two micrograms of beryllium dust per cubic meter of air. Now, that's a tiny amount. It's like taking the tip of this pencil, rubbing it into dust and then spreading that dust throughout a box six feet high, as long and as wide as this football field.

Narrator: (From Brush Wellman video) The degree of health risks vary depending on the operation and facility involved.

GIBSON: (VO) Brush Wellman says it spent hundreds of millions of dollars working to meet the standard installing air filtration systems, using respirators. It established a series of health and safety procedures and issued warnings to employees about beryllium's risks. We talked with Brush Wellman. Dr. David Dubner (ph) is the vice president of occupational safety.

Dr. DAVID DUBNER: Our company has worked very hard to meet that standard.

GIBSON: But didn't the company know right on through that it wasn't meeting the standard?

Mr. DUBNER: The company was meeting the standard, as it, I think, believed that it was meeting the standard as the standard was understood at the time.

GIBSON: (VO) But at the time and through the last 50 years, Brush Wellman was aware that in certain areas of its plants, it sometimes wasn't meeting the standard. Look at documents obtained by "20/20" from the Toledo Blade. Right at the start, a 1950 government report. Evidence of overexposure was available and no direct action was taken. Right up to today. These 47 case histories of Brush employees, including Gary Renwand, show repeated exposure to beryllium dust. In one job, Gary was frequently overexposed for over 16 years.

(OC) Did you suspect that you were way beyond the safety standards?

Mr. RENWAND: I had--I had suspicions, yeah. But when I would call for, you know, air counts and that to come in and take an air count and that, they would always come back and it was always all right.

GIBSON: Do you believe them?

Mr. RENWAND: I did then. I believed them.

GIBSON: Do you believe them now?

Mr. RENWAND: No. No, I don't.

GIBSON: (VO) In the mid 1970s, a new government regulatory agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, proposed making the standard more stringent. Today, this Dr. Peter Infante is director of standards review for OSHA.

(OC) Does the two microgram per cubic meter limit sufficiently protect beryllium workers?

Dr. PETER INFANTE: Absolutely not. There are some workers who will be adversely affected by exposures to that limit.

GIBSON: (VO) OSHA proposed to lower the standard from two micrograms to one. Brush Wellman and a number of scientists opposed the change, saying the standard was adequate as is. Also, reducing the standard would have meant major changes for Brush Wellman.

Mr. ROE: If it were accepted that the standard was not protective, then they would have to redesign large portions of their plant. It would cost millions and millions of dollars. The company said they couldn't afford it.

GIBSON: What position did DOE take when OSHA tried to toughen the standards?

Mr. RICHARDSON: The Department of Energy opposed it.

GIBSON: Well, but had DOE decided that the supply of a strategic metal was more important than the exposure of workers to a metal that could kill them?

Mr. RICHARDSON: Priority one was production of our nuclear weapons. As a last priority, was the safety and health of the workers that built these weapons.

GIBSON: (VO) Brush Wellman essentially gave the government an ultimatum. Documents from 1980 show the company said it would stop making beryllium if the standard were lowered. OSHA, the company wrote, must revise its proposed beryllium standard. The company won and opposition by the Department of Energy helped doom the tougher standard.

Mr. RICHARDSON: The collusion between the contractor and the Department of Energy in so many of these cases involving our workers, involving worker exposure and production is incredible.

GIBSON: (VO) We showed Secretary Richardson a Brush Wellman document reviewing the Department of Energy's promise to oppose the new standard.

(OC) A deal was cut.

Mr. RICHARDSON: A deal was cut, and that's wrong.

GIBSON: We talked to the present Energy secretary about this, and the Energy secretary said, and I'm quoting, "A deal was cut and that's wrong." Your response?

Dr. DUBNER: My response is that Brush Wellman was attempting to meet its customers' need by continuing the supply of beryllium. It felt the standard was safe, so it did not feel that there was a ethical issue with that.

GIBSON: (VO) So the standard remains at two micrograms per cubic meter in beryllium plants to this day, even though many health officials say it has cost and is costing lives.

(OC) Could disease and deaths have been prevented if your standards--lower standards of beryllium exposure had been adopted?

Dr. INFANTE: Oh, there's no question about that. Yes.

Ms. SANDRA LOGGINS: That's better.

GIBSON: (VO) And CBD is not just occurring in the beryllium industry. Sandra Loggins was recently diagnosed with the disease. She's 35 years old, married, the mother of two young children.

Ms. LOGGINS: I would work all day and I would come home and, I mean, I just didn't feel like doing anything. I would get supper fixed and they would eat and I would be ready to go to bed. I would--I would sit down on the couch and go to sleep. I was so tired.

GIBSON: (VO) And Sandra's story also adds a whole new dimension to the beryllium problem. She didn't get CBD making nuclear weapons. Instead, she got it working at a dental lab just outside Atlanta, Georgia. And dentistry isn't the only consumer industry now using beryllium. Tens of thousands of Americans today, right now, are working with beryllium, making golf clubs, racing bikes, computers, cell phones, even automobile air bags.

Dr. NEWMAN: It's important to say that just handling it is not a hazard and if you are a--an American consumer who has a car that has beryllium in it, that's not--that's not a risk to you. But if you are a worker and you generate dust, then this is a hazard.

GIBSON: (VO) But many companies now working with beryllium making consumer products may not fully recognize the hazards.

Mr. ROE: My guess is that there are hundreds and hundreds of places around this country that are handling beryllium and not handling it safely.

GIBSON: (VO) And many consumer workers like Sandra Loggins have no idea what they're working with. For nine years as a dental lab technician, she was sanding and polishing false teeth made in part with beryllium. Her husband, Ray, was outraged when he found out.

Mr. RAY LOGGINS: They never told anybody, you know? They never told her. They never told me. Nobody was ever aware that was inside that laboratory.

GIBSON: (VO) Sandra began having trouble breathing in the fall of 1997. Her family doctor had no idea what was wrong and sent her chest x-rays to a lung specialist.

Ms. LOGGINS: And when he did his and put it up, he showed it to us and you could see like spider webs in both my lungs.

Mr. LOGGINS: They weren't really telling us anything, but they were kind of leading us to believe that it might be cancer.

GIBSON: (VO) Frightened and anxious, Sandra was admitted to a hospital for a biopsy and because the damage to her lungs was so severe, emergency surgery was performed.

Mr. LOGGINS: She was in the hospital for a week and that whole week, you know, I was just--I didn't sleep. I didn't know how long she was going to be with me. I was scared.

GIBSON: (VO) After weeks of waiting, Sandra was told she was suffering from CBD and that she'd come down with it at the dental lab. And that raises an important question. Are consumer companies now using beryllium aware their employees are working with a potentially deadly metal? Brush Wellman says they are.

Dr. DUBNER: Brush Wellman makes extensive efforts and has always to my knowledge to alert all of its customers about the hazards of beryllium.

GIBSON: (VO) But the government wants to make sure. Last September, OSHA took action to help people like Sandra Loggins who worked with beryllium. It issued a hazard information bulletin to all companies working with the metal. It warned of the dust dangers and it warned that the current two microgram safety standard may not be good enough.

(OC) Why aren't back you trying to get the lower limit?

Dr. INFANTE: We are. We are.

GIBSON: To get back where you think we should have been 22 years ago?

Dr. INFANTE: Well, we don't know what the limit should be.

GIBSON: But you believed back then it ought to be one.

Dr. INFANTE: That's right.

GIBSON: But you're saying you're not sure now it ought to be one?

Dr. INFANTE: No. I'm not saying that. I'm saying maybe it should be less than one.

GIBSON: (VO) The scientific debate continues and Brush Wellman is still against lowering the exposure limit, saying the two microgram safety standard protects beryllium workers.

(VO) Bottom line, are you saying the company would still oppose toughening the standard and lessening the amount of ambient beryllium allowable in the air?

Dr. DUBNER: The company supports an approach to CBD prevention that is comprehensive and cuts off all routes of exposure.

GIBSON: (VO) So what are we left with? A lot of people making consumer products or making nuclear weapons or working in the beryllium industry are still getting sick. Just in 1997, a study at Brush Wellman's Elmore, Ohio, plant showed 9.4 percent of its workforce either has CBD or a condition that often leads to CBD. The problem is not going away.

Mr. RICHARDSON: They know they did something for the national security of the country. But I think they feel that their government let them down. At the very least, they should be--somebody should apologize to them.

GIBSON: (VO) And today, many workers like Gary Renwand are left angry and scared.

Mr. RENWAND: I know it's going to get me later on. That's why I feel bad--excuse me. I feel bad now because my son's got it.

GIBSON: Your son was just diagnosed?

Mr. RENWAND: Yes, he was.

GIBSON: How long had he worked in the plant?

Mr. RENWAND: Twenty-two years. It hurt. It hurt real bad. I felt devastated about it.

GIBSON: It should be pointed out that in letters to "20/20," Brush Wellman insists that the company did not conspire--that's their word--with the Department of Energy to defeat a new standard, and they maintain that they have for decades acted responsibly to protect workers and others. Last week in an extraordinary move, the Energy secretary announced a plan to compensate 3,000 nuclear weapons workers for sickness or death, about a quarter of those with lung problems caused by beryllium dust.

For more on this story, you can go to abcnews.com where you will also find the full series of reports from the Toledo Blade.

(Commercial break)

DIANE SAWYER, co-host:

Tomorrow night, good news. "20/20 Downtown" returns after a brief spring break with the untold story of the Supremes. They started the group together in the projects of Detroit. How did Diana Ross end up on top? What about the bad blood among friends? Tomorrow at 10:00, 9:00 Central.

And that's our program for tonight. We thank you for joining us. I'm Diane Sawyer wishing all of you a good night. We'll be here bright and early.

GIBSON: It will be indeed bright and early. I'm Charles Gibson. Don't forget "Nightline" after your local news. And from all of us at "20/20," have a good night.

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