

Questions & Answers from the View-Master Public Meeting Held on January 28, 2003



Original release date: April 2, 2003. Revised Sept. 16, 2003.

This document contains responses to questions that were gathered at the public meeting that Oregon DHS held with former View-Master workers and concerned citizens on January 28, 2003, at the Elmonica School in Beaverton.

To develop answers, these questions were referred to several different agencies, including the Office of Environmental and Occupational Epidemiology of Oregon DHS, the Office of Environmental Services and Consultation of Oregon DHS, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, Oregon Drinking Water Program, the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the Ombudsman's Office for Injured Workers in the Department of Consumer and Business Services, as well as the Mattel Corporation.

The responses were developed to the best of our knowledge at the present time. This document may be updated in the future if we receive new information.

Section XI. The Proposed Health Study

Q: How do we get extra funding needed for this study?

DHS is presently seeking funds from federal public health agencies, including ATSDR and CDC, as well as NIOSH. Former workers and community activist groups can help by working together with DHS to develop study methods and identify possible sources of funding.

Q: What is the ultimate goal of the study?

The goal of the health study is to determine whether former workers of the View-Master factory have an increased risk of adverse health and reproductive outcomes associated with exposure to TCE. This is an important goal because former workers want to know what the likelihood is of developing disease, or the likelihood that their medical conditions were associated with their exposure to TCE. Additionally, the findings of the View-Master health study may provide important new information that could be applied to other sites in the United States.

Q: What is an epidemiologic investigation?

An epidemiologic investigation evaluates whether there is a relationship between a particular exposure and disease, by examining the distribution of diseases and exposures in a given population. In the proposed View-Master health study, we will be examining health and reproductive outcomes among former View-Master workers to determine whether patterns of adverse outcomes emerge among the former View-Master population, as opposed to any one person. In summary, an epidemiologic investigation assesses the health of a group of people or a community, as opposed to a physician who assesses an individual patient's health.

Q: Who are we waiting for to go forward?

We are looking for the necessary funding to begin the health study. DHS has received funding for two years to conduct a feasibility study – in other words, to determine whether it would be possible and worthwhile to conduct a complete epidemiologic investigation based on existing information about the site, and about former workers of the plant. Oregon DHS has concluded from the feasibility study that the View-Master contamination posed a hazard to public health, and that there is an urgent need to thoroughly investigate the health impacts of the contamination on people who were exposed, by conducting a full health study.

Funding for the feasibility study will end in September 2003. For the remainder of the current budget period, DHS's goal is to develop the study proposal to help solicit future funding for the full epidemiologic investigation. DHS will rely on the input of former workers through the citizen advisory group (CAG) for developing materials and methods for the study.

Former workers who are interested in helping to move the study forward can help by joining the CAG and working together with DHS. You can contact DHS by calling (503) 731-4025.

Q: How valid is a study conducted twenty years after the fact?

The quality of the information gained through interviews is based on accuracy of recall of the information of former workers. Recall error is a potential problem that retrospective studies often face, but there are methods to reduce such error, or to examine the extent to which recall error may affect results.

In some cases, the delayed onset of a study to twenty years or more after exposure is advantageous from an epidemiologic perspective, in that some diseases such as cancer may take decades to show up. The prolonged period after exposure has potential advantages for detecting an effect that could be linked to the exposures at the View-Master plant.

Q: Will there be follow-up on pregnant women and their children?

In the proposed health interview study, we will be gathering information from both men and women about reproductive histories and birth outcomes, as well as health outcomes of their children.

Q: Is the intent of the survey to follow us for the rest of our lives?

No. The intent of the health evaluation study is to assess the exposures that people had and see if they link to any demonstration of health problems in people as of now. DHS will share the findings of the study with the former workers.

Q: How do I become a part of the study?

You can call DHS at (503) 731-4025 or (503) 872-5356 and provide your address and phone number so that we will be able to contact you when we are ready to begin the study.

Q: How will you determine the level of exposure for people who worked at different periods of times, and for different lengths of time? Can we determine when the contamination of the well started?

We will need to gather detailed information from former workers in order to examine several factors that affect individual levels of exposure:

- 1) How long a person worked at the factory
- 2) Amount of water a person drank
- 3) Specific job duties
- 4) The calendar years a person worked at the factory

For the first factor, how long a person worked at the factory, we will look at the total amount of time a person was employed. Some people may have stopped and started working at the plant over several periods of time, and we will need to add up all these different times.

For water consumption we will ask people to estimate how much water they drank on a daily basis, in order to estimate the total amount of water consumed during the time they worked there.

Because some people worked directly with TCE in the degreasing operations, while for others the only possible route of exposure was through drinking water, we will need to ask people detailed information about the specific jobs they held during their employment at the factory.

It will also be important to take into account the specific calendar years that a person worked at the factory because the levels of TCE in the supply well may have changed over the course of time. ATSDR is developing an environmental analysis to help determine how long ago the water first became contaminated, and what were the levels of TCE in the water throughout the factory's operation. Oregon DEQ has estimated that the TCE was in the groundwater as long as 20 years prior to its discovery in 1998. Through detailed groundwater modeling analyses, ATSDR hopes to confirm or refine DEQ's estimate of when TCE first reached the supply well.

Q: How much water did you have to consume to be affected, or does it matter?

We don't know the answer at this time. The only way to find out how people were affected is to perform a full health investigation that would involve interviewing the thousands of people who worked at the factory to find out how much water they consumed as well as other exposure factors, and what health problems they have experienced.

Q: Are you contacting all former workers?

Our goal is to contact all former workers so that we can get complete information on the entire group of people at risk, but at present we do not know who all former workers are, or how to contact them. Mattel has given us a list of 13,700 former workers, of whom roughly 6,500 have current address information. We are asking former workers, or the families of deceased former workers, to contact us and also to contact other former workers they know, so that we can reach as many people as possible. You can call DHS at (503) 731-4025 or (503) 872-5356 to provide your contact information or to make sure that your name (or your relative's name) is on the list of former workers.

Q: How can I find out how long my brother was employed at the plant and what his job was?

We don't know what is the best way to obtain this information. If you are a surviving next of kin, you may be able to obtain this information from the Social Security Administration. If your brother worked for Mattel or Mattel's subsidiaries, Mattel may have record of your brother's employment. You may contact Mattel at (503) 293-7343 or (503) 293-8466 for further inquiry. DHS asks that family members of former workers contact DHS at (503) 731-4025 or (503) 872-5356, to represent former workers who are unable to participate in the study, or are no longer living.