

E.P.A. in the Cross Hairs

The Environmental Protection Agency and the White House Council on Environmental Quality have been sharply criticized for playing down the potential dangers of exposure to ash, smoke and dust generated by the collapse of the World Trade Center. The inspector general of the E.P.A. has criticized the agency for making overly reassuring statements that could not be supported by any evidence in hand, and blamed the environmental council for pushing the E.P.A. to eliminate caveats and accentuate the positive. Our own sense is that much of the criticism is retrospective nitpicking of decisions made in the midst of a crisis, but it does seem clear that federal and local agencies could have better informed residents of any hazards they would face when they returned to work or live in the area.

Even so, it is important to understand that the major victims of exposure to pollutants were workers at the site or cleaning up buildings who failed to use respirators. Many of them are now being treated for continuing respiratory ailments, and some may well face lifelong disability. The broader public faced little or no risk from breathing the outdoor air once the initial cloud settled. An unpublished E.P.A. risk analysis found that people were unlikely to suffer adverse health effects from the outdoor air they breathed. Outside experts told the inspector general's office that levels of airborne asbestos, the

most feared contaminant, posed no significant long-term risk.

The main issue is whether apartments and offices have been adequately cleaned and tested to ensure that no toxic dust remains to cause a long-term risk to inhabitants. The inspector general's report faults both the E.P.A. and, by implication, New York City's Health Department for failing to press residents and businesses to seek professional cleaning in contaminated apartments instead of doing the cleaning themselves. Only 4,100 apartments have been cleaned or tested under a program eventually established by the city and federal government. Some 18,000 residential units were not tested or cleaned through the program, but many were presumably cleaned and tested before the program started. Nobody knows how many buildings might still have dust lingering in rugs, furniture or air vents that could emerge to cause a hazard. That suggests the need for one final testing program.

The real long-term health effects, if any, will not be known for decades. City and federal health officials started an ambitious tracking project on Friday that will try to follow the health histories of up to 200,000 people exposed to the pollutants. It behooves all who fear for their health or want to contribute to important research to participate.

Many

By Laurie Garrett

STAFF WRITER

Elizabeth Eagle was living on the Lower East Side two years ago, and her husband worked at American Express across the street from the World Trade Center. Shortly after the terror attack, Eagle, with no history of pulmonary problems, experienced pain in her sinuses and trouble breathing.

"It turned out I had sinusitis, and I had never had a sinus infection in my life," she said yesterday at the downtown Nelson Rockefeller Park. "In April [2002] I had sinus surgery at St. Vincent's." She described the pain as "worse than delivering a 10-pound baby," patting her 4-year-old son, Theo.

"I'm scared now, about what happens 10 years from now," she said, "how it will affect Theo."

Eagle and others interviewed yesterday recalled their experiences in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001.

Still Not Breathing Easy

"My asthma got worse. You couldn't breathe," said a woman named Betty, an employee of a banking firm near the site. Interviewed yesterday in a TriBeCa park, Betty and two co-workers, all of whom declined to give their full names fearing reprisals from their employer, expressed fear about the air they breathed and outrage at the Environmental Protection Agency's claims of air safety in the weeks after the attack.

"I was put on [the inhaler] Ibuterol," Betty's co-worker Jeane said. "I couldn't breathe. And I never had asthma or any problems before."

The women said their employer ordered them back to their offices after the EPA said the downtown air was "safe to breathe." And "one by one, everybody got sick," co-worker Michelle said. "It was a sort of cold. . . . And it would go on and on and on."

Allison Regan returned to her Battery Park apart-

ment after the EPA issued reassuring statements.

"I remember going into my apartment and within 20 minutes I had to get out. You could feel it in your throat," she recalled. Fearful of the air quality, Regan and her husband, both employed downtown, threw out most of their furniture and appliances and abandoned lower Manhattan. "How can we trust the government?" she asked yesterday. "I think it's one thing we value in this country — truth. And now? Who knows?"

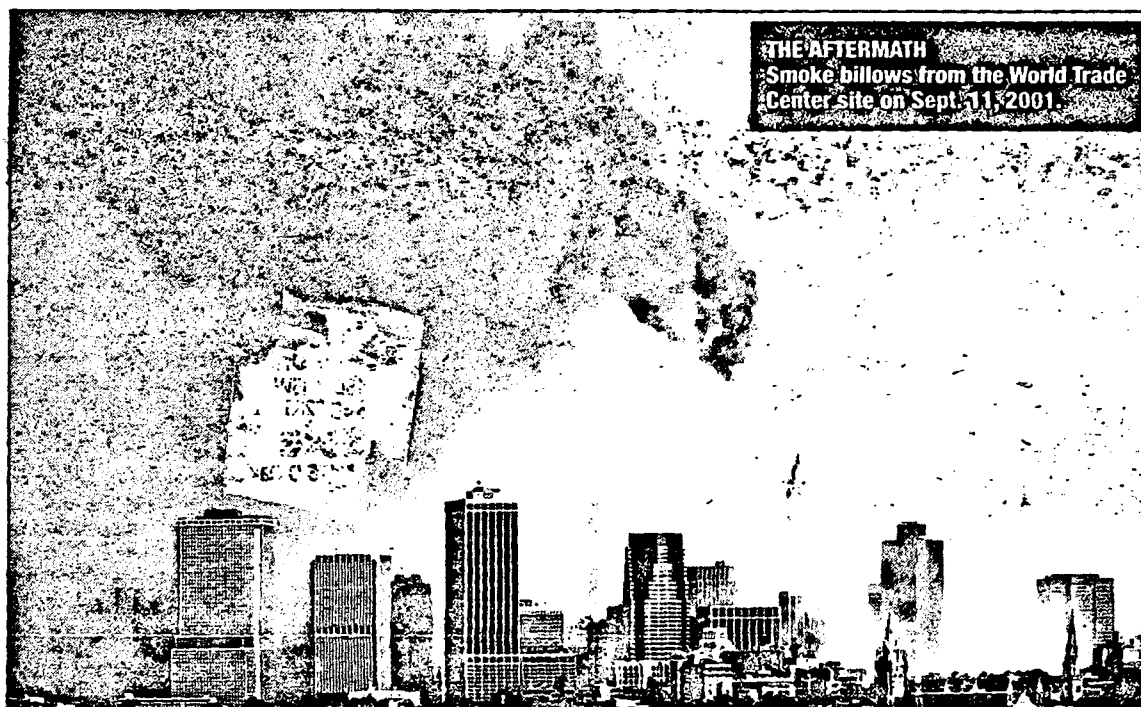
Louis and Judy Trazino live near South Street Seaport, about six blocks from Ground Zero, and their daughters, 5-year-old Heather and 7-year-old Jill, attend school three blocks from the site. When the attack occurred, Louis was on the school playground with Jill — and moments later had donned his firefighter's uniform and made it to the site.

"I had a cough for a long time," and tests a month

after the attack showed lung deficiency, Louis Trazino said yesterday. "I haven't suffered any permanent health consequences I am aware of," he said. "But I know people who worked there who were physical specimens, and now they are sick and out of work."

Nakeema and Thomas Stefflbauer moved back into their Battery Park City apartment after the EPA pronounced the air safe. Building management hired professional cleaners to remove the dust from their home, but the Stefflbauers say they were never told the home should be cleaned with sophisticated HEPA filter vacuums, or that their air conditioners should be replaced. The couple suffered breathing problems for weeks, and Nakeema awoke with painful headaches.

"We are worried about what will happen when they start building the new trade center," Nakeema said. "Who do we trust? What do we do?"



THE AFTERMATH
Smoke billows from the World Trade Center site on Sept. 11, 2001.

Newsday Photo / Jiro Ose

Danger in the Smoke and Dust | Human health studies conducted after Sept. 11, 2001, have reported the following:

CLEANUP CREWS

Immigrant laborers hired to clean up businesses and apartments suffered severe respiratory symptoms and in some cases illnesses involving organ systems besides the lungs. Dr. Steven Markowitz and colleagues from Queens College tested 415 cleanup workers, "nearly all of whom," Markowitz said, suffered a long-lasting syndrome of upper airways irritation, congestion and chest pain.

OFFICE WORKERS

Dr. Steven Levin at the Mount Sinai Hospital is leading a team studying 6,100 workers in offices and businesses below Canal Street on Sept. 11, 2001. Nearly all have symptoms of respiratory illnesses similar to asthma: periodic gasping for air, a choking sensation and unusual sensitivity to airborne irritants. Levin is convinced they have a type of "occupational asthma" called Reactive Airways Disease Syndrome.

GROUND ZERO COPS

Dr. Walfredo Lyon and his Downstate Medical Center team in Brooklyn found RADS in a study of 82 New York City police officers who worked around Ground Zero during the fall of 2001. "Most are still sick," he said. "And that's what they have — RADS."

FIREFIGHTER COUGH

A study conducted by several medical schools and the city fire department found 332 firefighters at Ground Zero suffered respiratory problems, including RADS. The researchers dubbed the ailment World Trade Center Cough. Most of the firefighters are on permanent disability.

SMALLER BABIES

Women who were pregnant on Sept. 11 and lived or worked around Ground Zero were twice as likely to deliver a baby smaller than normal among New Yorkers of similar racial

and economic backgrounds.

Dr. Philip Landrigan and his colleagues at Mount Sinai School of Medicine examined 187 women and their newborns, comparing them with 3,000 mother/baby combinations from uptown Manhattan. They found the birth weight for the Ground Zero babies was an ounce or more below normal.

ASTHMA INCREASE

Anecdotally, physicians in Brooklyn and lower Manhattan report a sharp uptick in adult-onset asthma diagnoses since Sept. 11. Still pending are the results of a joint NYU/New York State Department of Health survey of 10,000 lower Manhattan residents, conducted by Dr. Joan Reibman of NYU. Results have been tabulated, but they are not ready for release, Reibman said.

Newsday / Justin Gilbert

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