

health & safety

The Coulter Case: sacked for

telling the truth to workers

by Brian Martin*

Dr John Coulter has been a leading environmentalist in South Australia since the 1950s. His research, advice and public statements have helped workers and citizens challenge health hazards on the job and in the community on numerous occasions. Not surprisingly, this activity has been most unwelcome in the top levels of chemical corporations and their allies in government and the scientific community.

On June 30, 1980, John Coulter was sacked from his job at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science (IMVS) in Adelaide, and the environmental mutagens testing unit which he headed was closed down. This case shows how scientists who speak out against corporate and bureaucratic vested interests on issues affecting the public interest can be stifled.

John Coulter joined the IMVS in 1959 at the age of 28, after practising general medicine for a few years. His research at the IMVS covered a range of topics, and in 1967 he was promoted.

SPOKE OUT

During his time at the IMVS Dr Coulter spoke out, in his private capacity, on numerous environmental and health issues, including uranium mining, water fluoridation, the proposed petrochemical plant at Redcliff in South Australia, the consequences of nuclear weapons tests at Maralinga in SA in the 1950s, and the health hazards of drugs and industrial chemicals.

Because he has been willing to write articles and speak at public meetings and rallies on such topics, Dr Coulter has often been called upon by trade unions, environmental groups and other organisations.

TOXIC PRODUCTS

Often Dr Coulter has been willing to speak out when others with the same knowledge kept quiet. At one stage in the proposal for a petrochemical plant at Redcliff, it was planned to produce and export ethylene dichloride, a toxic intermediate product, rather than the usual final product polyvinyl chloride. The ethylene dichloride was to have been taken out of the Spencer Gulf in 30,000 tonne tankers. Dr Coulter publicly pointed out that ethylene dichloride is highly toxic and a potential cause of cancer.

Health Commission staff were aware of this hazard, but none said anything publicly. No doubt they felt vulnerable due to their position in a government department. It is now accepted by the US National Cancer Institute that ethylene dichloride does cause cancer.

Epichlor hydrin is a bonding agent, one of numerous chemicals used in the pulp and paper industry.

About two years ago, Dr Coulter provided information to AMWSU members at Mount Gambier in SA about

the health hazards of epichlor hydrin. The workers knew what chemicals were being used in the manufacturing process, but could not obtain information about their hazards through normal channels.

In speaking out and giving advice about risks to health and environment, it is easy to offend corporate and government interests which have a financial or bureaucratic stake in products, practices or policies linked with the risks. Research institutes such as the IMVS depend on government money provided through government bodies which are sensitive to corporate interests.

The IMVS also receives some direct grants from corporations. As a result, those who speak out about risks to health and environment may experience pressures to keep quiet. This has happened to Dr Coulter on several occasions.

LEGAL ACTION

In 1978 the Bayer company brought a legal action against the ABC, partly due to remarks Dr Coulter had made on a television programme regarding one of its products containing the mutation-causing pesticide dichlorvos. The action was subsequently dropped.

But pressure was brought to bear on Dr Coulter through the Agricultural Chemical Trade Association and the Director of the IMVS. Dichlorvos is currently under urgent review by the US National Cancer Institute, as some animal tests have suggested that it may cause cancer.

In 1979 Velsicol Australia complained to the Director of the IMVS about a lecture Dr Coulter had given, in a private capacity, to a Melbourne seminar on pesticides. Dr Coulter had mentioned the way the parent company in the US had handled information on the capacity to cause cancer of two of their products, chlordane and heptachlor. This matter is well covered in Samuel S. Epstein's extremely valuable book, *The Politics of Cancer*.

CANCER TESTING

In the late 1970s Dr Coulter on his own initiative set up in the IMVS a unit for testing the capacity of substances to cause mutations — their mutagenic capacity.

This environmental mutagens testing unit (EMTU) provided a cheap, quick and fairly reliable assessment of

● Dr John Coulter

the cancer-initiating potential of substances. The unit made available a routine service for the testing of chemicals. It was the only such unit in South Australia and one of three in Australia.

Some of the samples submitted for testing came from groups outside the scientific community, in particular from workers' health organisations.

TOLD WORKERS

Dr Coulter sometimes provided results directly to the groups or workers involved as well as to the IMVS. Such action escapes the control over scientific information normally held by the management in government scientific organisations.

A couple of years ago, workers who were coating steel pipes with pitch for the SA Engineering and Water Supply Department were concerned about possible health risks from fumes. Dr Coulter investigated for the workers and found that levels of polycyclic hydrocarbons in the atmosphere were very high. Each 100 kilograms of pitch used in the coating process released 1.2 kilograms of benzpyrene.

In terms of total mutagenic (potentially cancer-causing)

activity, this was equivalent to four million cigarettes, released in a fairly closed area.

After the workers protested, the job was contracted out to private industry. The SA Health Commission then inspected the work conditions. Unlike Dr Coulter, the Commission provided figures on benzpyrene levels to the employer but not to the workers.

On April 16, 1980, Dr Coulter submitted a report to the Fire and Safety Committee of the IMVS on the mutagenic and potentially cancer-causing properties of ethylene oxide, which was being used in an IMVS laboratory as a sterilising agent.

At the same time as he released the report to the IMVS Committee, Dr Coulter provided copies to the workers at the laboratory using the chemical. The Director of the IMVS rebuked Dr Coulter for releasing the report to the workers. However, the significance of the findings were not disputed. The use of ethylene oxide was immediately stopped and \$40,000 is being spent on the construction of an alternative sterilising apparatus.

COULTER SACKED

It was somewhat earlier, in

March 1980, that Dr Coulter was informed that on June 30 the EMTU would be closed and that he would be transferred and demoted with a drop of \$10,000 in annual salary. But instead of being transferred and demoted, on June 30 Dr Coulter was sacked outright, being informed of this only a few days previously.

The issue of Dr Coulter's dismissal is currently before the SA Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Court. The issue before the court is whether the dismissal was harsh, unjust or unreasonable. But there are also other issues which deserve attention.

MISLEADING

For example, the Director of the IMVS, Dr Bonnin, has said that "Many drugs and chemicals are now tested by, or for, their manufacturers and there is little need for this work in Adelaide which manufactures almost none of these substances." However, it is well known that results of such testing by or for manufacturers are often unavailable, poorly publicised, inadequate or misleading. Whether or not the chemicals are manufactured in Adelaide appears irrelevant if workers and consumers are being exposed in Adelaide.

Work at the EMTU showed the mutagenic properties of the drug tinidazole. Unknown to Dr Coulter at the time, two earlier researchers, Lindmark and Muller, had obtained the same results using samples provided by the pharmaceutical producers Pfizer.

But the work of Lindmark and Muller was not mentioned by the company in its promotional literature when tinidazole was launched on the Australian market. This case illustrates the necessity for independent testing facilities.

SAME PRESSURES

Since the closure of the EMTU, there are only two mutagen testing facilities in Australia. Only one is truly independent, the one run by Dr Don MacPhee of the Microbiology Department at La Trobe University in Melbourne, who like Dr Coulter has done testing for unions. The other laboratory, in Sydney, is under the control of the Commonwealth Department of Health, and is subject to the same sorts of pressures as the IMVS.

Dr Bonnin has said that "It is not the role of this institute to establish a large routine testing service for the testing of chemical substances for cancer-producing properties." In a sense this is the key point. Who makes the decisions about the direction of scientific research, and who benefits from the particular decisions made? The Council of the IMVS obviously believes that it should be making these decisions.

Dr Coulter and his

supporters believe that the IMVS actions are serving the interests of chemical and drug companies at the expense of the public interest. Dr Coulter says that "As a public institution the responsibility of the IMVS is to defend the public — not to defend the private interest of drug and chemical companies . . . This is the fundamental difference between us."

CONCERN

A large number of individuals and groups have expressed their concern about the sacking of Dr Coulter and the closing of the EMTU at the IMVS. Many letters have been written to newspapers and to the SA Minister of Health.

Trade unions, led by the United Trades and Labour Council of SA, have expressed concern about the removal of a service which has frequently benefited their members. The AMWSU in SA has actively protested. The opposition Labor Party in SA has called for a public inquiry into the IMVS, questions have been asked in SA Parliament by members of the ALP and the Australian Democrats, and in inquiry into the IMVS has been held.

The Coulter-IMVS affair illustrates clearly the type of conflict that can arise where there is the possibility of pressures on the direction and use of scientific research exerted by corporate and government vested interests on the one side and by workers and the general public on the other. Such conflict is seldom publicised. It is precisely because Dr Coulter has been outspoken about issues of public concern that his dismissal is also a public issue. Whatever the outcome of the case, it is certain that this struggle will not be the last one of its kind.

*Dr Brian Martin is a scientist at the Australian National University, Canberra.

SEATAINERS

There was a lot of publicity about a dispute involving members of the AMWSU and Electrical Trades Union at Seatainers' Shipping Containers Terminal in Victoria.

Media reports alleged that the workers were on strike to force the company to employ the sons of some workers as apprentices. Those reports are absolute lies.

Members of the two unions were not on strike, they were sacked by the company over issues which, in the company's admission, have nothing to do with apprenticeship jobs.

The union's policy is totally opposed to any demand for preference of employment that discriminates either in favour of, or against workers employed by a particular employer.

The union supports the idea that all young people who apply for a job should have equal opportunity to be considered.