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Dioxins: Occupational Exposure – Putting a Government Response into a Public Policy Context

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Dioxins in NZ: Work Related Background

- ❖ Work-related exposures principally in primary industry areas:
 - timber treatment;
 - manufacture and usage of pesticides in agricultural and horticultural sectors.
- ❖ Exposures largely historical:
 - complicates the gathering of data.



Dioxins in NZ: The Public Policy Context

- ❖ In machinery of government terms, functional responsibilities run across the interface of:
 - Occupational Health;
 - Public Health; and
 - Environmental Health.
- ❖ Involves multiple central government and local government agencies.
- ❖ Competing for resource priority with current issues.
- ❖ Question of who takes the lead.
- ❖ Not a lot of experience in terms of whole of government policy-making processes interactively engaging with individuals and communities.



Dioxins in NZ: Scientific & Public Uncertainty

- ❖ Difficult (and costly) to isolate the health effects of dioxin exposure from other personal and environmental factors:
 - need for well-grounded, publicly credible, and well-communicated research.
- ❖ Challenge of translating research findings into a shared understanding of the issues as a basis for sustainable and credible public policy action.



Dioxins in NZ: The Social Impact

- ❖ For those who were exposed, a feeling of powerlessness (lack of control):
 - were not knowingly exposed.
- ❖ Exposed workers were often of lower socioeconomic status:
 - added to their relative disadvantage.



Dioxins in NZ: Public Policy Overview

- ❖ Historical
 - impacts on the gathering of evidence.
- ❖ Complex causal links, and public uncertainty.
- ❖ Machinery of government context: functionally spread.
- ❖ Challenge of linking central and local government decision making, and local engagement.
- ❖ No single “right” public policy response.



Dioxins in NZ: The Public Policy Challenge

- ❖ Contribute to the setting of a sustainable public policy priority by the Government around dioxin exposure issues.
- ❖ Deal with the wider consequences of past practices in a much more consistent and integrated (holistic) way, rather than on an issue-by-issue basis.
- ❖ Learn from the mistakes of the past to achieve a forward-focused perspective which promotes awareness and improves work practices in the future.



Dioxins in NZ: Role of the Department of Labour

- ❖ Continue to strengthen our occupational health capability.
- ❖ Work within established inter-agency structures (Organochlorines Senior Officials' Coordinating Group).
- ❖ Promote research to inform all parties of the issues (e.g. health effects of former timber workers exposed to pentachlorophenol).
- ❖ Provide accessible information on the work-related effects of dioxin exposures.
- ❖ Facilitate access to available support services.

