



Agenda for Research on Chernobyl Health: Chernobyl Public Health Research coordinated by IARC

The Chernobyl accident in 1986 has created enormous public concern. Despite numerous studies, the exact consequences of the accident remain a matter of debate and the future directions of Chernobyl health research has been subject to wide differences of opinion.

The ARCH project will investigate the state of research into the health consequences of the Chernobyl accident

To this effect, IARC is taking a coordinating role in a 'scoping study' of all relevant research to determine where future research efforts are most needed, and to advise on the potential value of proposed studies to public-health decision making.

Speaking at the opening of the Meeting of the Expert group and advisors of the ARCH project, Dr Christopher Wild, Director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer, said: "Twenty-two years after the accident, the health consequences of Chernobyl are still debated, and yet much of what we conclude about those health effects will be the measuring stick of our future guidelines in ionising radiation protection: for this reason we need to know what we know and be sure of what we don't know".

Chernobyl and health: A strategic research agenda

Population studies following the Chernobyl accident have provided valuable insights that enhance our understanding of the effects of radiation on human biology. Careful, large-scale studies of people who have experienced protracted exposure to low levels of ionising radiation can help to answer outstanding questions in radiation protection and radiation biology.

The main output of ARCH will be a strategic research agenda (SRA) for short-, medium- and long-term research on the health consequences of the Chernobyl accident. The development of such a sound agenda necessitates the coordinated efforts of a critical mass of experts throughout Europe including the three most affected countries, Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

ARCH will therefore bring together experts in epidemiology, clinical practice, pathology, cancer, dosimetry, radiobiology, genetics, epigenetics, risk assessment and public health to prepare a practical and cost-effective research strategy.

Inviting the public to participate

The success of a detailed, reasoned, focused and motivated medium- to long-term SRA depends upon its broad acceptability.

In order to ensure public acceptability, ARCH will seek the active participation and input of the research community and members of the wider public while preparing the SRA. An independent, external peer-review group will ensure that the field is adequately covered in an unbiased way and that all proposals are sufficiently detailed, justified and attainable. Scientists from outside Europe will also be included as advisors, to ensure harmonization with other existing or planned activities around the world.

The SRA will address the values and drawbacks, both scientific and social, of the proposed research. The objective of the ARCH website is to serve as a forum, open to members of the public who are invited to comment on the work of ARCH and to submit their own proposals.

The project itself should serve to increase public confidence in scientific assessments of the health risks associated with radiation exposure.

Societal impact

Understanding the health effects of radiation exposure is of particular importance when addressing exposures resulting from a mixture of external and internal radiation, as was the case for victims of the Chernobyl accident, because current risk estimates for internally incorporated radionuclides are very uncertain. The Chernobyl accident provides therefore a unique opportunity to test several scientific hypotheses regarding both the exact mechanisms underlying radiation action and biology/genetics in general.

Results of the project will be communicated to the public health authorities of the three most affected countries in order

to assist in planning long-term public health programmes that aim to reduce the health impact of the Chernobyl accident. Results will also be shared with other affected countries in Europe.
The SRA will be delivered to the EU's Euratom programme and will inform the implementation of Euratom's own agenda on research into the effects of low-dose radiation exposure.

Public events

"Paving the way for a more engaged and informed society in relation to radiation protection and health risks associated with ionising radiation is part of the International Agency for Research on Cancer's agenda. Transparency in terms of the Chernobyl accident's consequences is essential to research in general and radiation research in particular", Dr Wild concluded.

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