

Ryan risks nuke neighbors' health

06/17/02

By U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL)

The Chicago Sun-Times

Nuclear power plants in our nation are on the terrorists' hit list, and Illinois is the most nuclear state in the country. Nonetheless, Illinois is not taking all the necessary steps to protect the health and safety of our families in the event of a terrorist attack on a nuclear power plant in our state. In an act that defies logic, Governor Ryan has so far declined the federal government's offer to supply for free - that means at no cost to the state - enough potassium iodide pills to protect everyone within 10 miles of a nuclear power plant from thyroid cancer. Offering instead the most feeble of excuses, the Governor's top advisors have said, "No thanks."

Excuse 1: People would have a false sense of security after taking the pill and fail to evacuate the area.

Can't you just see it? A nuclear plant explodes and next door a mother says to her child, "Honey, just take your pill and get back to your homework." I give the people of Illinois credit. They will take their pills and head for the hills.

Excuse 2: Potassium iodide offers limited protection.

A spokesperson for the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety called potassium iodide a "cruel hoax," stating that "it only protects against radioactive iodine, which is just one of dozens of radioactive chemicals that would be released in a reactor accident." In response, I say "So?" The thyroid gland just happens to be the most vulnerable organ in the body to radiation exposure. The Food and Drug Administration, the World Health Organization, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the American Thyroid Association and the Union of Concerned Scientists all agree that potassium iodide provides safe and effective protection against thyroid cancer. Flu shots only protect against the flu, yet we strongly advise people to take them.

Excuse 3: Adult doses of potassium iodide are too strong for children.

Yes, that's true, and that's why instead of a whole pill, children over the age of three should take one-half pill, and children under three, one-fourth pill. The guidelines are no more difficult to follow than any other over-the-counter medication such as cough medicine. Poland administered 10 million doses to children after the Chernobyl accident averting the dramatic upsurge in thyroid cancers that occurred in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, where no pills were distributed. And according to the Food and Drug Administration: "There is no question that the

benefits of KI (potassium iodide) treatment to reduce the risk of thyroid cancer outweigh the risks."

Potassium iodide pills are a crucial component of any comprehensive nuclear accident contingency plan. That is why Congress passed and the President signed a law that would make these pills available to local governments if the State government does not have a plan for stockpiling or has a plan that does not go beyond the 10 miles radius. But the question remains: Why won't Illinois take responsibility? Thirteen states, including New York, have already accepted the federal government's offer.

Potassium Iodide pills may not be a cure all, but they are, in the words of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, "a reasonable, prudent and inexpensive supplement to evacuation and sheltering.in the event of a severe nuclear power plant accident."

On July 2nd, the House Government Efficiency subcommittee, on which I am the ranking Democrat, will hold a field hearing in Chicago. I plan to raise this and several other critical issues relating to public health and to the safety and security of Illinois families. Our residents can be protected only if all branches of government do their part.