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Silicon Sickness?

- *Industry Won't Release Health Data*
- *No Government Agency Is Studying Claims*

SAN JOSE, California



CBS When doctors told former IBM engineer Lee Leth he had terminal bone cancer, he was stunned.

"I was really healthy," he says. **"In fact, about two or three years before I was diagnosed, we climbed Mount**

Adam, a mountain in the state of Washington, and I can't even climb the steps of my house right now."

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"The long-term health effects on the workers, we don't know, because the industry refuses to let us look at them."
Dr. Joe LaDou

Leth's challenge now is staying alive long enough to try and prove that his cancer came from exposure to toxic chemicals at the IBM computer chip plant in San Jose.

"Is there a relationship? I think there is," Leth tells **CBS News Correspondent Sandra Hughes.**

Leth is not alone. A total of 130 former IBM workers and surviving relatives are suing Big Blue. But with no scientific evidence to prove that the process used in making chips causes cancer, they're fighting an uphill battle.

"The worker exposure levels, we don't know, because the industry doesn't share the data," explains Dr. Joe LaDou, who has tracked the health of Silicon Valley workers for 30 years. He claims that every time a health study is proposed that might link the manufacture of computer chips to cancer, it goes nowhere.

"The long-term health effects on the workers, we don't know, because the industry refuses to let us look at them," Dr. LaDou adds.

The California Department of Health requested a study of cancer rates among semiconductor workers. The idea had the support of several occupational health experts, and the Environmental Protection Agency was willing to pay for it.

"Everything was ready, funding and all," Dr. LaDou recalls. "But the industry simply marched in, with Intel and IBM leading the pack, and said, 'No.' No explanation, no nothing. It just won't happen."

Intel executive Howard High, speaking on behalf of the Semiconductor Industry Association, says, **"This industry has always done the right thing when it comes to worker safety."** But, he adds, the industry will not agree to a study until someone brings it evidence to prove a link between chip-making and cancer.

"We keep looking," says High, **"and we don't see the scientific, the medical evidence that makes you believe that that is, in fact, the case."**

The booming industry employs 160,000 people nationwide, and it's growing so fast, government health agencies can't keep up.

While occupational health experts fear a potential cancer epidemic is being ignored, not one government agency is currently studying the cancer claims, even though some see a real danger.

"I am alarmed," says Charles Jeffress, assistant U.S. labor secretary, **"at the chemical use in this industry and alarmed at the number of illnesses that are being reported by people working in this industry."**

The government may claim to be alarmed. But when Dr. LaDou wrote to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, asking it to force the industry to participate in the California health study, he was told that the agency did not have the authority to **"compel...industry...to participate in research for such a study."**

So who is responsible for worker safety?

"It's very clear by law in this country that employers are required to provide a workplace free of safety and health hazards," says Jeffress.

Try telling that to Lee Leth, whose claims until now have been ignored by an industry that seems to answer only to itself.



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Silicon Valley Cancer Scare

- *Former Employees Are Suing IBM*
- *Claim They Got Sick In High-Tech 'Clean Rooms'*

SAN JOSE, Calif.



CBS

CBS Growing up in Silicon Valley, it was a dream come true when two Foutche sisters landed jobs with Big Blue. Two decades later, 50-year-old Linda Foutche says working for IBM may cut her life short. Both she and her sister have cancer, reports **CBS News**

Linda Foutche

Correspondent Sandra Hughes.

"Two girls that worked for IBM," says Foutche, **"My other sisters didn't work there and they're fine, the other two."**

Linda's rare skin cancer has spread and she's not able to work anymore. But for 20 years she made computer chips in an IBM clean room, a sterile environment where dozens of toxic chemicals are used to make the chips.

"I would go check out acetones, freons, photoresists, bottles marked with skull and crossbones," she says. **"I even would ask the gal in the chemical room, 'Gee, are these things safe?' You know. 'Oh yeah! We work for IBM it's safe, you know that.'"**

Like hundreds of other workers in the industry, Linda wore a head-to-toe bunny suit. But the suits were meant to protect the sensitive chips from dust and human contamination, *not* to protect the employees.

After working in the clean room for only a year, Linda says she not only became sterile, but very ill as well. **"Your eyes would water, your nose would run. I had skin rashes,"** she says.

When Linda got sick, she says IBM told her the problem wasn't in the clean room, it was in her head and she needed to see a psychiatrist. **CBS News** obtained a letter from that psychiatrist that says **"Miss Foutche has primarily a chronic medical illness... from exposure to toxic substances in her work environment at IBM Corporation."**

Who does Foutche hold responsible for her illness? **"I hold the chemical companies, I hold IBM, the industry for not telling people."**

Lee Leth blames Big Blue too. The 56-year-old former IBM engineer often inspected the clean rooms as part of his job. **"My wife noticed that I came home several times with acid holes in my shirt,"** he says. **"I didn't think anything of it at the time, until we started having this problem."**

The problem is bone cancer. A disease that has left the once strong and tall Leth six inches shorter and unable to walk without crutches.

"I don't want to see other people facing this problem that I'm having," he says. **It's a miserable, terrible, painful illness."**

Leth and Foutche are among 130 former employees and surviving relatives who are suing IBM, claiming the chemicals used there gave workers cancer.

In a statement to **CBS News** IBM said: **"We do not believe that any of the illnesses that people claim they contracted while working at IBM were the result of working at IBM."**

That claim doesn't surprise Dr. Joe Ladou, an occupational health specialist who has studied the semiconductor industry for 30 years. **"The workers were getting very high levels of exposure and were not being told, and I believe that's still true today in many of these plants."**

Those levels don't exceed government standards. The trouble is no one knows if the levels of exposure are enough to cause cancer because so far no one's been able to investigate.

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