Department of Health

From Steve Brine MP
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The Rt Hon the Lord Rooker
House of Lords
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09 JAN 2018

Dear Lord Rooker,

Thank you for your letter of 21 November to the Prime Minister about Public Health England's (PHE's) duty of care towards its employees.

I note your concerns.

PHE's Centre for Chemical, Radiation, Chemical and Environmental Hazards (CRCE) in Oxfordshire has internationally recognised expertise in assessing public health risks from radiation exposure. In recent years, CRCE has provided expert scientific support to the US Department of Energy's Russian Health Studies Programme. This research is conducted under the authority of the Joint Coordinating Committee for Radiation Effects Research, a bi-national committee representing federal agencies in the United States and Russia. The aims of the Programme, which has been running for over twenty years, are to:

- clarify the relationship between health effects and chronic low-to-medium dose radiation exposure;
- estimate the cancer risks from exposure to gamma, neutron and alpha radiation; and
- provide information to the national and international organisations that determine radiation protection standards and practices, including those in the UK.

The research has been primarily carried out by US and Russian scientists, focusing on the assessment of health risks from radiation exposure from nuclear weapons production activities in the former Soviet Union. Two CRCE scientists, one of whom was Dr Puncher, provided expert scientific support in internal dosimetry and collaborated on dosimetry assessments of workers at the Mayak production facilities.

Despite the media claims to the contrary, Dr Puncher was not a member of the expert team that led the emergency public health response to the Litvinenko case; his work being limited to carrying out some work at CRCE on dose calculations for his scientific group leader. I have been assured by PHE that Dr Puncher was properly briefed in advance of visiting Russia and there was no extant risk considered or known of to give cause for concern.

It goes without saying that we were profoundly sad to learn of the death at such a young age of Dr Puncher, a dedicated and highly valued public servant, and we extend our sincere condolences to his family, friends and colleagues.

STEVE BRINE