

9/11 health risks and BMCC

David Newman is an industrial hygienist with the New York Committee for Occupational Safety & Health (NYCOSH). Clarion spoke with him about post-9/11 environmental contamination in Lower Manhattan and health concerns for people who work or study at BMCC.

Q. What kind of health risks might exist for people who work or study at BMCC?

A. The answer depends on their level of exposure to hazardous substances. The first issue is, what exposures did they have, if any, on 9/11 itself? Second, what, if any, exposures they may have had since then. And third, what exposures may result in the future – from the demolition of Fiterman Hall, the Deutsche Bank building, etc.

The people who had the most exposure are probably those caught in the dust cloud on 9/11.

Q. Even though that was just one day?

A. Yes, because for many people this was a massively acute exposure – an intense exposure to multiple substances. Granted, it was a short period of time, but we have a fairly high level of concern for people who were caught in the dust cloud.

The next group of concern would be rescue and recovery workers “on the pile” at Ground Zero.

Next would be cleanup and janitorial workers cleaning residential and commercial buildings around the Trade Center site. These were largely immigrants hired as day laborers and some regular building maintenance personnel. Another group is workers who restored essential services: water, electricity and so on, who disturbed dust and debris as they worked.

The last group would be residents, workers and students with no direct relationship to cleanup or rescue work, but who’ve spent substantial time downtown and may have been exposed to contaminants in indoor air.

Q. So that last group would include most people at BMCC. What are some of the potential sources of exposure since 9/11?

A. The debris from Ground Zero was trucked to a waste transfer site directly across West Street from BMCC, where it was transferred to barges. That site in particular was dirty – it was poorly run. The main problem was that the dust suppression was badly managed. As the WTC debris was transferred from trucks to the barges, it was supposed to be wet down so that dust didn’t become airborne. All too frequently, however, that did not happen!

This was right across from BMCC and close to the trailers set up to provide temporary classrooms after the loss of Fiterman Hall. Putting these trailers on the highway, immediately across from the waste transfer site, was not well thought out.

Working around Ground Zero



Ron Capozzoli

The dust cloud on 9/11 included lead, mercury, asbestos and dioxin. Health risks vary with the level of exposure.

Also, BMCC’s North Moore Street entrance was used as a staging area for emergency personnel, which means that WTC dust was probably tracked in on people’s clothing and shoes.

Q. Have there been measurements of contamination inside BMCC’s main building?

A. After 9/11, the PSC pushed aggressively for independent environmental testing of BMCC’s ventilation system and interior. Those tests found that the main mechanical ventilation systems were heavily contaminated with lead. While there’s no direct proof, a reasonable presumption is that the bulk of that lead was WTC-derived. Lead levels in classrooms or offices did not exceed EPA residential guidelines, but the contamination of the ventilation system was of concern.

Q. Could this lead have come mainly from years of traffic on West Street?

A. The highway might be a presumed source – but gasoline has been lead-free for years. Eliminating lead exposure from gasoline has been a significant result from environmental controls. Also, both BMCC and Stuyvesant High School were contaminated with lead. Since both are relatively new buildings, the source was more likely the WTC than vehicle emissions.

Q. What are some of the potential sources of lead in dust from the WTC’s collapse?

A. One is lead-based paint, which is banned for residential use but still allowed in the workplace. It’s common for structural use, like coating beams.

Another source would be computers. Each PC can have up to several pounds of lead in it, and there were

thousands of computers in the Twin Towers.

In the very little data we have from the EPA on indoor, as opposed to outdoor, environments lead was one of the heavy hitters among 9/11 contaminants. So while there’s no absolute proof, it is most likely that the lead in BMCC’s ventilation system was derived from the Trade Center collapse.

Q. What happened after the lead was found?

A. The PSC pressed hard for the ventilation system to be cleaned. BMCC’s administration agreed to do so, but the work wasn’t finished until 2003. The union’s health and safety officers say that the college ultimately did the right thing, but that it shouldn’t have taken so much prodding, and that BMCC shouldn’t have had to beg for the money to get this done.

Q. What about the ventilation systems in the trailers?

A. They’re vastly inferior to the system in the main building, with filters at the low end of the protection scale. So people in the trailers may have been more exposed to WTC contaminants and less protected by the inferior filters.

Q. Is there evidence that these exposures at BMCC have caused health problems?

A. A very early study, six months after 9/11, did find higher rates of persistent respiratory symptoms among BMCC employees. While we don’t have data specific to BMCC since then, it is possible that some BMCC faculty, staff and students have or will develop respiratory problems from WTC-derived exposures.

Q. What substances in WTC-related dust could be harmful?

A. First, I want to emphasize that not all exposures are equal. You can’t equate exposures at BMCC with exposures of those who spent months in recovery work in and around the pile. The exposure at BMCC would be much less, but not necessarily nonexistent.

The other point is, not all exposures to hazardous substances produce illness. The greater the exposure, the greater the risk – but many people can be exposed and never become ill.

That said, we’ve seen a variety of respiratory problems among those with WTC exposures. Some WTC dust was as alkaline as Drano, causing irritation and even chemical burns to the respiratory system. This was one cause of what’s colloquially called “WTC cough” or “WTC syndrome.” In some people it’s been persistent, in others it’s cleared up. We’ve also seen an elevated incidence of new-onset asthma and exacerbation of existing cases.

Again, this is in general. We have virtually no data for BMCC folks specifically.

Lead and mercury are central nervous system depressants and are associated with neurological problems. Dioxin and asbestos, also present in WTC dust, are cancer-causing agents. Cancers are diseases with long latency periods – that is, a long time between exposure and the emergence of symptoms.

Leukemia and other so-called “soft tumors” – blood cancers and so on – could begin to show up five

years or so after exposure, so around now would be the beginning of that time-frame. So-called “hard tumors” like lung cancer generally take 15 or 20 years to develop. Most medical experts think a large elevation in the number of cancers is not

likely, but many believe that some increase is likely. However, that’s really unknown.

Q. If someone at BMCC is concerned about WTC-related health effects, what should they do?

A. Everyone who worked at BMCC in the wake of 9/11 should register with the New York Workers’ Compensation Board before the August 14 deadline. (See sidebar above.) This protects your right to file a claim in the future.

If you’ve been ill, and you think your symptoms might be related to 9/11 exposure, you should go to the WTC Environmental Health Center at Bellevue Hospital – you don’t have to have been a Ground Zero worker. [See sidebar.]

It’s also important to prevent any further exposure in the future – and here the biggest concern is the upcoming demolition of BMCC’s Fiterman Hall, heavily contaminated with dioxin, asbestos, lead and other hazardous substances.

Register by August 14 to protect your rights

By DAVID KOTELCHUCK
PSC Health & Safety Officer

Workers who may have been exposed to WTC-related contamination since 9/11, such as BMCC faculty and staff, must register with the New York State Workers’ Compensation system by August 14 to preserve their rights to claim workers’ compensation benefits if they later become ill from this exposure. This filing is *not* a claim for workers’ compensation, but a registration of WTC exposure should you become ill in the future. If you don’t register, you will lose your rights to future WTC-related benefits. More information and registration forms are at www.nycosh.org.

“While the registry is defined in terms of those who took part in cleanup work, this category is undefined and potentially very broad,” said David Newman of NYCOSH. “If you worked at BMCC after 9/11 you should sign up now to protect your rights.”

(There is a similar registry for potential future disability retirement for those in Teachers’ Retirement System Tiers III or IV. This has an earlier deadline of June 14; registration forms and information are at www.trb.ny.us.)

If you believe you now have a WTC-related health condition, expert treatment is available at the Bellevue WTC Environmental Health Clinic ((212) 562-1720). Thanks to new city funding, treatment is not limited to rescue workers.

“It’s important for people to go to this clinic as opposed to just relying on their own doctor,” said Newman. “This clinic has the experience of seeing hundreds of people with WTC-related illnesses and can make sure you get the right diagnosis and treatment.”

It’s essential that Fiterman is demolished in a way that prevents release of these contaminants, and BMCC faculty, staff and students can help ensure that this is the case. Every six weeks there’s a public meeting about various aspects of the decontamination and demolition plan. You can get dates of upcoming meetings at www.bmcc.cuny.edu – click on ‘Fiterman Hall News.’

The PSC has been very active since September 2001. It’s part of the WTC Community Labor Coalition, which is pressing for a safe and transparent process, and it’s on the advisory committee for the Fiterman demolition. So getting active with the union – with the chapter at BMCC or with the PSC Health & Safety Watchdogs – is a good way to stay informed and affect what happens.