



Navy Is Testing Microwave Risks

THE NAVY is exposing 50 volunteers to potentially harmful microwaves to find out what these mysterious rays do to the human body.

An increasing number of Americans are bombarded daily by microwaves from ovens, TV transmitters and other electronic equipment. Military specialists, in particular, are encountering microwaves in their work with radar equipment, secret communications devices and bomb-guidance systems.

Medical reports link the rays to cataracts, damage to male reproductive organs, cardiovascular changes and even psychological problems. Except for cataracts, however, the health damage is uncertain and unexplored.

The Navy's research project, using human guinea pigs, is intended to find out how dangerous microwaves really are. The chief researcher is Dr. Dietrich Beischer, a German scientist during World

War II, who has made himself the chief guinea pig. He subjects his own, 60-year-old body to frequent microwave doses. The sailors and officers in his program at the Naval Aerospace Medical Institute, Pensacola, Fla., also get regular microwave bombardments, Dr. Beischer tells us.

Many nations have set standards for microwave equipment. The Soviets, for example, have set a limit 1,000 times smaller than the 10 milliwatts-per-square-centimeter permitted by our own Defense Department.

Even the Soviet limit, however, is a million times greater than the natural background level of microwaves from the sun. Meanwhile, Beischer concedes any level is mostly guesswork.

"The public should not be alarmed," he told us. "We do not believe that even 10 milliwatts will cause cataracts. But we aren't sure what is safe."

To protect his volunteers against cataracts, Beischer masks them in weird wire-mesh eyeshades. He also monitors "hot spots" in the skulls of his subjects in an attempt to seek out other damage before it occurs.

As the Navy volunteers move on to other jobs, they continue their tests, since microwave effects may show up years afterward. The final results, Beischer admits, may not be known for decades.

Reported cataracts in military radarmen, for example, sometimes don't appear until a decade or more after the victim leaves the service. Genetic damage might not show up until the second generation.

The German-born scientist hopes to complete findings

on 40 physical and mental functions ranging from blood to brain. His first tentative results will be made public in mid-1973.

Complicating the Beischer study is the Navy's enormous financial stake. If Beischer discovers the 10-milliwatt level is too lax, the Navy would have to spend millions modifying or replacing its vital microwave gear.

Indeed, a previous Navy test was abruptly cancelled when it began to show that monkeys under heavy microwave exposure were suffering frightening injury and illness.

But Beischer insists he won't hold back his findings. "The Secretary of the Navy has a personal interest in our work," he told us. "It's possible we'll have to tighten up standards. Every city is crisscrossed with these microwave beams."

Footnote: Rep. John Moss (D-Calif.) has received disquieting reports that microwaves are causing eye problems among air traffic controllers. He will ask House Health Subcommittee Chairman Paul Rogers (D-Fla.) to investigate.

Unsung Hero

OCCASIONALLY we learn of an extraordinary bureaucrat, one whose quiet achievements deserve attention. Such a man is Jack Metzler, who recently retired without fanfare after serving 21 years as superintendent of Arlington Cemetery.

Under Metzler, Arlington Cemetery evolved from a graveyard into a national shrine.

As he looks back, he can recall the unusual incidents: the old widow who asked that a coat be wrapped around her deceased husband to protect him from cold weather; the chaplain who fell backward into an open grave; the wife who vehemently demanded that her husband not be buried next to a certain WAC.

But the scene Metzler prefers to recall is sitting with his wife on L'Enfant's memorial tomb on a warm autumn evening and gazing out beyond the graves to the life of the city across the Potomac. For Arlington Cemetery was more than Metzler's job; it was his home. In a modest house amidst a myriad of tombstones, Jack Metzler and his wife Bernadette raised four boys.

"But I must admit," he now tells us from his retirement home in Florida, "that it's nice to be out among the living."