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News

MIT Named in Radiation Suit

Radioactive Material Fed to Children in 1950s Experiments

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By **THE CRIMSON STAFF**

Radioactive material was fed to more than a dozen children at a state home for the retarded fifty years ago to give Quaker Oats an advantage over Cream of Wheat, according to a \$60 million federal suit filed last week.

The suit--brought against the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Quaker Oats and several doctors at the state Fernald School in Waltham--was filed in U.S. District Court Friday on behalf of 15 children used as test subjects as Fernald during the 1940s and 1950s.

Some experiments carried out on the children during the Cold War were for military or medical purposes. But according to Michael Mattchen, the lawyer who filed the suit, much of the research done at Fernald was for the commercial benefit of Quaker Oats.

MIT made the radioactive isotopes and scientists from that school and Harvard carried out the experiments, Mattchen said. The lead researcher, Dr. Clemens E. Benda, was a member of the Harvard Medical School faculty in addition to his post as a researcher at Fernald.

But Mattchen maintained in an interview yesterday with The Crimson that Harvard's connection to the research was merely tangential. Accordingly, Mattchen said, Harvard University was not named in the suit.

According to the suit, the children were told they were part of a science club to trick them into participating, and some of them were exposed to more radiation than federal limits allowed.

Small amounts of radioactive calcium were put in their cereal, allowing researchers to track the oatmeal as it was digested.

The suit also said the Atomic Energy Commission authorized 3,000 doses of radioactive calcium, but "fewer than 150 doses are accounted for" in public reports, leaving 2,850 does unaccounted for in the records.

"What was the genesis of these particular experiments? It seems simply to be, 'What are the relative benefits of oatmeal and Cream of Wheat?'" said Mattchen.

"There was an utter failure to treat these kids with any human decency," he said.

Last year, a state panel said the small amounts of radioactive calcium and iron eaten by 74 residents of the Fernald School had no discernible effect on their health.

But the panel said researchers violated the children's human rights.

President Clinton apologized last October to members of the "science club" at the Fernald School and to other subjects of radiation experiments sanctioned by the federal government.

His task force said the experiments at the Fernald School were unethical, but the subjects were not hurt and so deserved no federal compensation.

The president of MIT has apologized for the way the Fernald experiments were done.

The suit filed last week asks for \$1 million for suffering and \$3 million in punitive damages for each test subject "to deter defendants from ever again using human beings ... as guinea pigs for experimental procedures."

This story was compiled using Associated Press wire dispatches.

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