

Suspected Health Effects in Populations Near Uranium Facilities

Navajo Nation - New Mexico

A two-year preliminary study of birth defects among Navajos, which began in January 1981 and is being funded by the March of Dimes, has found certain major physical abnormalities conspicuously higher in 5,344 births between 1967 and 1974." Those abnormalities include hydrocephaly, microcephaly, Down's syndrome, cleft lip and cleft palate, and grand mal seizures, a form of epilepsy.

The March of Dimes study, under the leadership of Dr. Lora Shields, a well-known biologist at the Navajo Community College in Shiprock, New Mexico, was initiated in response to the findings of a preliminary survey of birth problems in Navajos conducted by the Navajo Community Health Representative Program. That survey was done in response to the reports of numerous birth defects and abnormalities among Navajo children. It compared families in abandoned uranium districts (Red Valley, Arizona, and Shiprock), with Navajo families in nonuranium areas as controls. The alarming results showed a *twofold excess* of miscarriages, infant deaths, congenital or genetic abnormalities, and learning disabilities among the uranium-area families."

Preliminary findings by a Navajo Health Authority statistician in early 1981 showed a serious increase in bone cancer and reproductive organ cancers in children under the age of 15 on the New Mexico side of the Navajo Reservation in areas of past uranium activity." Using data gathered by the New Mexico Tumor Registry and the U.S. Indian Health Service, Dr. Donald Calloway also found ovarian and testicle cancers among Navajo children at least *15 times* greater than the U.S. average, and bone cancers *five times* the U.S. average." The geographic distribution of those cancers appeared in the former New Mexico uranium districts of Shiprock, Farmington, and Grants. Despite the preliminary results, however, the Indian Health Service has denied funding for a complete epidemiological study of the problem.

Other important preliminary findings include a 16-year period of altered sex ratios in Shiprock during the height of operation of a uranium mill there," an increased and overwhelming demand for handicapped services for Navajo children," and elevated rates of birth defects in all areas of uranium mining and milling in the Four Corners states.

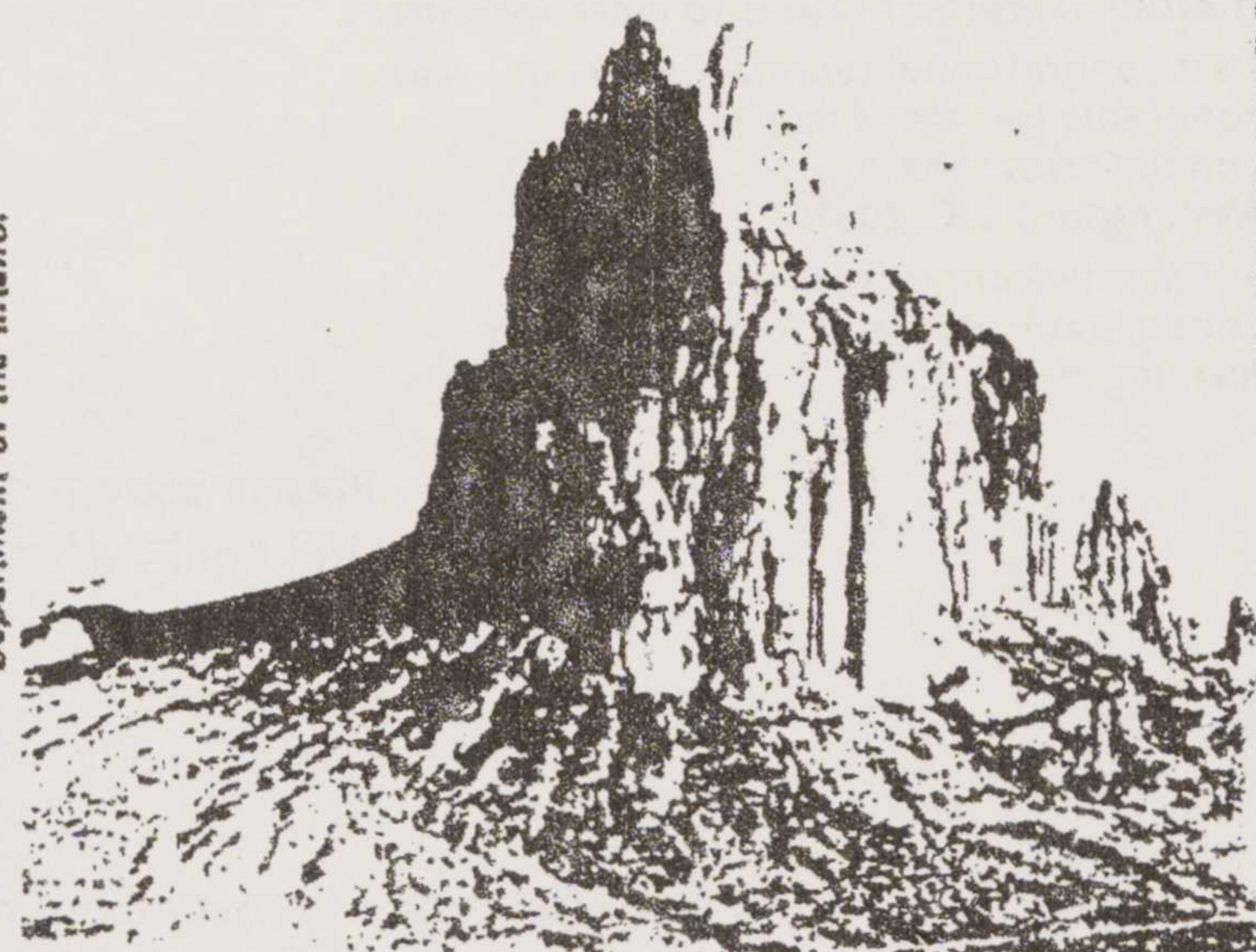
Many of those preliminary data and findings were aired publicly at a conference, "Birth Effects in the Four Corners Area," sponsored by the Department of Family, Community and Emergency Medicine of the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, held February 27, 1981. Conference participants included official representatives of the NRC; EPA; U.S.

Department of Energy; PHS; Indian Health Service; Navajo Health Authority; U.S. Centers for Disease Control; the health agencies of New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Colorado, and Arizona; and Southwest Research and Information Center.

Although the conference summary did not conclude that the adverse effects under discussion were definitely linked to uranium operations, conference presenters termed the data "provocative" and said that they warranted immediate detailed epidemiological studies to determine if in fact the reported and observed health problems are associated with past uranium activities."

None of the federal or state agencies represented at the conference have provided any funding for the recommended studies. Some evidence suggests that at least one of those agencies suppressed the information developed at the conference and thwarted funding possibilities for detailed studies. The agency, the Indian Health Service (a division of PHS and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), said in a recent report to Congress ("Health Hazards Related to Nuclear Resource Development on Indian Land," 1983) that there is no evidence of adverse health effects in Indians in uranium development areas and that there is no need for additional studies or funding for such studies. The report was requested by Congress in 1980 and has been forwarded to the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs and the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee. It does not mention the Albuquerque birth effects conference or the recommendations of the conference attendees, despite the fact that several health professionals and concerned citizens discussed the conference findings with IHS officials working on the report and sent the officials copies of the conference proceedings prior to the publication of the final agency report that eventually was sent to Congress."

Department of the Interior



SHIPROCK

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