

Kaye: Why are Ground Zero workers getting sick?

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Editor's note: In our Behind the Scenes series, CNN correspondents share their experiences covering news and analyze the stories behind the events.

NEW YORK (CNN) -- Could this be a coincidence? Is this for real? How will we ever know? Those are just some of the questions I asked myself when writing about workers and emergency responders from Ground Zero who now claim they're sick from the toxic cocktail to which they were exposed.

I got to know two guys in particular. They are former New York Police Department detectives Rich Volpe and John Wolcott, partners for 11 years in the narcotics division.

They worked together on the pile at the World Trade Center site for nine months. Now Wolcott has leukemia and Volpe has double kidney failure. Both blame their illnesses on the toxins at Ground Zero, like benzene and dioxin.

They weren't given respirators to wear, they say, until weeks into the cleanup, only to be told that the respirators had the wrong filters and they would need new ones to properly protect themselves.

Wolcott told me black soot would spill out of his ears in the shower and onto his pillow at night for months. The shower floor, he said, looked like the bottom of a barbecue grill.

Doctors at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City are operating the largest screening program of its kind for 9/11 responders. We spoke to Dr. Stephen Levin, who heads the program.

He acknowledges seeing a rise in respiratory ailments and concludes that is from the dust and the poisonous air at the site. But Dr. Levin will not go so far as to say there is a direct link between cancers that are developing in responders and their work at Ground Zero five years ago.

I asked Dr. Levin how long it normally takes for cancer to develop in someone exposed to these toxins. "There is generally a minimum of 15 years that has to pass from the exposure to a cancer-causing agent to the time you can really diagnose that cancer. And frankly, in most cancer types, that latency period, that delay, is more often 20 and 25 years," he said.

So what are we to make of this? Could this be some horrible coincidence? Could these people have been predisposed to these cancers? One attorney I interviewed, David Worby, said he has 8,000 clients who got sick at Ground Zero. More than 60 of them are already dead, he said.

On top of this, there is the political backpedaling taking place behind the scenes. Why were workers allowed on the site if the air was dangerous?

Former EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman said in 2001, "If there's any good news out of all this, it's

that everything we've tested for, which includes asbestos, lead and VOC's [volatile organic compounds] have been below any level of concern for the general public health. Obviously, for those who are down there, these [respirators] are very important."

But this week, in an interview with 60 Minutes, Whitman blamed the City of New York, saying it was the city's job to make sure workers were protected.

Former Deputy Mayor Joe Lhota told CNN: "The city repeatedly instructed workers on the pile to use their respirators." The city says it supplied more than 200,000 respirators to responders.

The challenges for the people who are sick just keep coming. Their claims are being denied by insurance companies and many are too sick to work. They don't have 20 years to wait for a conclusion to be made about how and why they are sick. And the funding for Mount Sinai's study may run out in a few years anyway. They need help now. And they want some answers.

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