Health physics: An important link in the safety chain

The Health Physics Society's (HPS) Web site defines health physics as "the profession devoted to protecting people and their environment from potential radiation hazards, while making it possible to enjoy the benefits of the peaceful use of the atom." Health physicists (HP) play a key role in the day-to-day operations of the world's nuclear power plants, as well as in the fields of medicine, defense, regulatory enforcement and occupational safety, education, and the environment. These days, especially in the continuing wake of 9/11, they are also major players in nuclear power plants' security and emergency planning.

A couple dozen colleges and universities in the United States offer programs with degrees or options in health physics. Some offer B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees, and there are associate's degree programs for health physics technicians available from several programs, as well. Some who choose the field of health physics come from other technical backgrounds, as displayed by the specialists featured in our Health Physics special section. Certification is available through the American Board of Health Physics for those with four-year or advanced degrees, and through the National Registry of Radiation Protection Technologists for technicians.

Our hats are off to health physics professionals, who play a critical role in keeping employees, the public, and the environment safe.

Take the HP who works at a power plant. According to the very informative HPS Web site (<www.hps.org>), duties and responsibilities can include radiation protection and detection equipment purchase and maintenance, ensuring compliance with federal regulations, preparation and updating of procedures, and writing safety standards and emergency plans and conducting drills. HPs review workers' radiation records, perform radiological surveys, and analyze survey and laboratory results to ensure that the plant's prescribed radiation limits are not exceeded. These tasks are of the utmost importance to a plant's smooth and safe functioning, and to the safety and protection of a utility's most important asset, its employees.

The articles in this issue's Health Physics special section provide some insight into the world and work of HPs. Ted Lazo, the scientific secretary of the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency's Committee on Radiological Protection and Public Health, received B.S. and M.S. degrees in nuclear engineering from the University of Virginia, and a Ph.D. in health physics from the University of Florida. He spoke with International Editor Dick Kovan about the committee's radiological protection program. Read about the details of the committee's complex and interesting work starting on page 30. Rick Michal, *Nuclear News* Senior Editor, interviewed Leo Wainhouse, manager of the Radiological Emergency Preparedness Section of the Washington State Department of Health's Office of Radiation Protection. His B.S., from Washington State University, is in bacteriology. He provides a look at the state's emergency preparedness training program and his work with first responders from the trainer's viewpoint, beginning on page 36.

Ray Johnson, president and director of the Radiation Safety Academy, in Gaithersburg, Md., holds a B.S. in civil engineering from the University of Vermont and an M.S. in sanitary engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He studied radiochemistry at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, is a professional engineer, and is certified by the American Board of Health Physics. Johnson takes a practical approach in addressing how to motivate workers to implement good health physics practices. His observations begin on page 40. Also included is news on a recently released report from the United Kingdom about slightly increased radiation exposure among the population. Turn to page 33 to find out what the experts in the Health Protection Agency's Radiation Protection Division say is the reason for that increase.

It is important that the health physics profession be recognized for its critical contributions to the continued safe operation of nuclear power plants and to the safety of other workplaces where radioactive materials are used. We are happy to oblige.—*Betsy Tompkins, Editor and Publisher*