

June 27, 1979

Occupation: Physician

INTERVIEWER: When did you first hear about the problem at Three Mile Island?

NARRATOR: I suppose I was doing radiology over at BMC and they have an FM station and I just heard a broadcast about it. I had missed it on the evening news the night before and just never heard about it.

INT: BMC? What's that?

NAR: Belvedere Medical Center. It's just a little bit from here, about three blocks away.

INT: Did you hear it from any particular person or did you hear it from the newscasts or what?

NAR: I think I just heard it on the newscast and then some people were talking about the leak. I think that's all I heard.

INT: Did you know that there was a nuclear reactor there before the accident?

NAR: I guess I did.

INT: Just never particularly paid any attention to it...?

NAR: No, right right.

INT: Do you know how far Three Mile Island is from us?

NAR: I didn't. I had no idea how far it was and I looked on a map and I assume we are between 20 and 25 miles away. Best I could figure.

INT: When did you find that out and why did you look?

NAR: Why did I look? Because I was worried which way... I had known radiation could be falling and I was just trying to figure out a distance. I guess there's safety in distance.

INT: When you first found out about the problem, what did you think about?

NAR: I guess, it's hard to say... I was thinking about "I wonder what radiation is coming out?" and "I wonder what the levels are?" and I remember – I don't know how far long it was where they started to give some numbers on the news which meant nothing to me because I didn't know what they were really referring to. And they said, like, rads or millirads – I didn't know if they meant millions per cubic meter of air or what they were

trying to say. And I don't think they knew when they said it in the news media. Before too long, I started wondering what radiation was escaping because some radiation will stay around for a long time and some will relatively quickly leave. So that sort of thing. Umm... does that answer your question?

INT: Pretty much. What did you think about as a radiologist? Did you think that you had any better feeling for what was going on in some sense than other people because this is something you deal with everyday that you understand what radiation is?

NAR: Well I guess in some sense. But in the other sense, I wasn't sure what radiation was coming out.

INT: What types of radiation?

NAR: Yeah, what type of radiation. Is it something that would go in your body and stay there and be bound to bone, for example. With a long half-life, meaning that it would be around for just about forever. Or just something like Xenon—in a couple of days a lot of it's gone. Is it iodine? Was it a short-lived iodine or a long-lived iodine that was coming out? I didn't know.

INT: Did you ever find out?

NAR: Yeah, they said it was iodine 13 I guess – the Xenon.

INT: The Xenon didn't bother you, but the iodine did?

NAR: A little more, because it was concentrated in the thyroid. But then the levels they said that they said were around were low. And we measured some over here in the lab with our nuclear medicine equipment and we got just about nothing – very low levels, which was interesting.

INT: Who was it that measured it and under what circumstances?

NAR: It was our technician – we thought that we better have some information if we started getting calls – so what we did is we had him just measure in the lab and then we took the vacuum bottle outside and punctured it to get outside air. And measured it. And Bob McCaunicky measured some soil.

INT: From right around here?

NAR: From around here, yeah. He's involved with nuclear medicine and we are too in radiology.

INT: The answers that you got back from the measurement and everything pretty much reassured you that things were alright?

NAR: Yeah. At least at that point they were trying you know....

INT: Was is at any point worrisome to you?

NAR: It was worrisome I guess was it that they...the worry of what might happen...there was a quick melt down which you learn from the news.

INT: Did you feel that it was a really serious situation, right there at the beginning?

NAR: No, no. As it went on I thought there was potential for a serious situation. But from what I have learned it wasn't serious at the time.

INT: Was there at any time during the whole period of events that you ever got to think that it was a crisis? A very, very serious situation?

NAR: I think where I thought it was serious was if something happened. At the point I didn't think...at times you wondered what was going on but as I learned more on what happened I wasn't super concerned at the time. It was just that...if there was a melt down as I said might happen, and a lot of radiation was to leak then it would be serious.

INT: But did you try to get further information?

NAR: What would we do? Our chief Herlman I think he or Bob were trying to call to get some information, I don't think they couldn't get through.

INT: Did you spend more time for instance looking at the news or the newspapers?

NAR: Oh yeah. You mean more than I usually do?

INT: Yeah.

NAR: Usually I don't spend a lot of time...figure I would read everything they had about it or listen to the evening news that sort of thing.

NAR: Did you talk about it with your family and friends?

NAR: Sure, sure. We talked about it a lot. Why the reason we talked about it was we were radiologist and we thought people would be asking us and we didn't have a whole lot of information. And the other thing is you know you talked to your family about what if you know if it was a big thing should you go stay with your mother for a little while. That's what I think.

INT: Did your attitude change at all?

NAR: Yeah. Let me think about that. Did my attitude change? It was worrisome that something could go wrong. And that worries you still, like when they talk about

reopening reactor one. Sort of worries you that it shouldn't go wrong and it did. And what the short-cut is being taken with the reactor. Somehow seems that they should be made safe and it was a shame to see that it was potential for a bad accident.

INT: How did you feel about other people's reactions to the problem?

NAR: For one thing it seemed to be a media event. I think they caused a lot of reactions in that. They seemed to make it more than it was a lot of times. And coming on frequently with this announcement and that announcement and you know I guess it was that announcement where the area had been evacuated. It was a false announcement and caused a lot of, it was on the national news that Thornburgh had asked for an evacuation in general or something like that. It was very interesting to see how they were saying it was so dangerous yet they were sending all the newsmen here. You wondered how dangerous it was if they were sending all the people here instead of fleeing the area. In Pittsburgh, I know because I have family there, it seemed to also get worse the further you went away, the way the news stories went.

INT: Were there any particular news stories or news sources that you followed more than the others?

NAR: Well, I guess I was more watching TV. Because I would get home and I would turn on the evening news. From the hospital, and it was always interesting to hear the government...what was his name...the government man

INT: Oh yeah Denton.

NAR: Yeah Denton, because he seemed to have a cool head and he was saying what was going on.

INT: How do you feel that they handled the situation, the media?

NAR: If I say poorly then you'll say why and I'm not sure why, but I think because they seemed to just blow it up. I guess they had to make a story themselves, and if they didn't have a story you'd turn to another channel. But, for all that eventually happened, apparently very few people were hurt, or will be hurt from the radiation, and yet they really went wild over it.

INT: Well, how about the government, how do you think the government reacted to it?

NAR: Hard to say, they brought the people, and I really don't know that I could say (?) how they reacted.

INT: Well, what about the third party, the whole thing – the industry?

NAR: You're suspicious on that one – highly reactive – seemed to say that nothing was wrong. And I don't know. I guess they covered it up somewhat. On the other hand they

were trying not to get people alarmed. Feel a little sympathy for them, but on the other hand they probably really blew it in a way by letting... either there were shortcuts or whatever happened.

INT: Was there any one particular person that you found particularly reliable or anybody's word that you trusted more than anyone else's?

NAR: I guess a lot of people seemed to trust Denton. And I guess I seemed to follow what he said pretty well.

INT: Is there anybody you mistrusted?

NAR: I can't say really. I guess you sort of mistrusted the officials of the industry.

INT: Well, do you think that those people who were in charge were actually in control of the situation?

NAR: Well, it seems that nobody was really in control of the situation for a lot of the time because they didn't know exactly what was happening. Ask that one again... Do I feel the people in charge...?

INT: Were those in charge of Three Mile Island...?

NAR: The company.

INT: The company... do you think that they were actually in control of what was happening?

NAR: Well, you weren't led to believe so. So that's what I would say there. By listening to the news you didn't think they were.

INT: Do you think that they're in control now? Do you think that they know what going on at this point or do you think that they learned from what was going on...?

NAR: Oh yeah, sure they learned. I don't know if it'll never happen again. There's been a leak recently at Peach Bottom.

INT: What happened at Peach Bottom?

NAR: Just that I heard that there was some radioactive leak. A small amount – quote unquote – that the NRC said wasn't significant. And I think that it was shut down for a couple of times like a day or so.

INT: Did that bother you at all, when this particular news came up?

NAR: Yeah, I had assumed that this had happened frequently in the past and just now since Three Mile Island that you'll hear about it.

INT: What do you think about that series of events?

NAR: To tell you the truth, I just thought, gee we have a leak. Itz by a little one and they shut it down. I guess one thing I thought is, I wonder what the future of nuclear reactors are. And I don't know the answer is to that. But I wonder if they shut down if we'll have enough energy. That's a good question, I guess.

INT: You mentioned that the NRC said that it was insignificant, did the fact that the NRC said that, did that reassure you more or so than...?

NAR: I don't know, to tell you the truth, that was on the news – I think that the NRC said such and such – and you tend to believe them.

INT: You tend to believe the NRC as opposed to...?

NAR: I guess they do, they quote it that way, let's put it that way. I guess you tend to believe them more than the company because the company obviously has more of an interest in it. Then you wonder, well is the company lying?

INT: Did you make any plans that were different from any that you might have ordinarily made?

NAR: I guess we acutally... yeah, well, we had plans that if something really went bad how we could just get out of the area. Where my wife and kids could go if it got more dangerous. You know, while I stayed here.

INT: Where were you going to go?

NAR: It was interesting... the thing about this, if they tried to really evacuate, you probably just NARive east or west or wherever you want, there're going to be roads... there are going to be roads that are planned. So we looked at the map and we said, well we'll try to go west or south or whatever, depending how it goes. Figured that we probably could go down 81 no matter what. Because I think if we all had to leave and... like on a hospital (unintelligible) we'd just pull off the first exit after the Pennsylvania border or something and... so we had to have some plans if something went bad.

INT: So she'd go and you'd go and you'd just meet on the other side of the border?

NAR: Umm hmm.

INT: Did you have any plans about where you would go, would you stay with family or with friends?

NAR: Probably family or just...

INT: Did you have anybody in mind, a particular set of family or just sort of in general?

NAR: It was, if we had to east, we'd go to her sister-in-law's or my parents, if we go west we'd go to her parents.

INT: At what point would you have left?

NAR: That's a good question. We were gone for a couple of days but that's because of something we had planned. We came back in the midst of all this. If we had gone... when would we have gone... good question.... I guess if radiation got high. Now what high is, I don't know.

INT: You don't know what level of radiation would have caused you to pick up and take off?

NAR: Well, since there was almost nothing, I guess there was not much problem there. I guess if it would start to slowly creep up, I don't know which way we were going, to tell you the truth. I don't know exactly which way to go now.

INT: Would you have waited, do you think, for the official announcement to evacuate?

NAR: I don't know. I guess... see that depends... if it's a point I would probably evaluate it myself and figured out what was safe and what wasn't safe and the heck with the announcement.

INT: Did you do anything for leaving, did you pack up your bags, top off your gas tank, anything like that?

NAR: Probably, I think we did top off the gas tank. We didn't have anything packed.

INT: What would you have taken with you?

NAR: I guess everything I could, basically. That's a good question – what would you take with you? You would take more than for a vacation, I guess, because you'd expect it to be a long vacation. And if you really thought everything was going to blow – whatever that means – if you thought that you could get back for a while. That's an interesting thought, because what would your money be worth if you had it in the bank here and nobody could get into the bank. And I guess, ideally you'd want to have all your, but you wouldn't, because if everybody's leaving at the same time, the banks would be closed.

INT: Did you do anything... did you go to a bank to withNARaw any money or did you just cash your check rather than deposit it or anything like that?

NAR: No. I don't think I did. But it was a strange thought that if the area as severely radiated or contaminated you'd have nothing. Just about nothing.

INT: Since we're talking about that, what do you think might have happened, what do you think would have been the worst, or what do you think might have been the logical outcome?

NAR: I guess the worst thing would be a meltdown, and I am really not an expert on that. I may be a radiologist, but I'm used to low levels of radiation for diagnosis.

INT: Did you have any pictures in your mind?

NAR: Well, the pictures in your mind, I guess were the pictures that the press made... painted that there could be an immense cloud of radiation and I guess long lived isotopes escaping. So I guess in my mind I would think that the worst thing that would happen would be everything would irradiated for a good while and it would be uninhabitable here. And then in your mind, what would be the worst thing – that you couldn't come back to your house and that you wouldn't have any money or our goods or your old pictures of your kids or your movies or whatever. And you'd just have to go somewhere. May be hard on everybody. I mean I could find a job – probably a pretty good one – but it would still be hard. And for the other people it would be even harder.

INT: How long do you think it would be before you could come back?

NAR: I really don't know, but I would imagine what would be the worst – it would be years. And wouldn't that be weird, to come back and see your house all overgrown and just falling apart. It would be really strange.

INT: It's an interesting thing to think about. Is there somebody in your life that you were watching in order to decide what to do?

NAR: Oh, not really. In other words, if they left, I'd leave?

INT: It could be something like that.

NAR: No, no.

INT: Just sort of watching anybody – could have been at work, at home, or anywhere – just watching them the way that they were acting or reacting or what they were doing. Or as you say, if they left, you'd leave?

NAR: I don't think so – no one specific person.

INT: Did you have any mental pictures of what was actually going on at Three Mile Island? We are just talking about mental pictures and what would have been the outcome of it. But did you any mental pictures on what was going on at the time?

NAR: Just the people who were sweating and trying to find out what was happening and how to contain it. They say that good minds were brought in. I have this picture with people just sitting down discussing, trying to figure out what the heck was going on and how to fix it. And the base, like in any scientific thing where there's a problem. I was sort of happy that the people came to solve it. Sort of reassuring thing. Although you knew that something could still go wrong from listening to the news, at least according to them. That was my mental picture.

INT: Do you think that anything that happened at Three Mile Island might have affected your health?

NAR: I really doubt it, unless there's something that I don't know. I think I probably know... there have been reports about the radiation levels have been well. To me personally it's probably really very low. I get a lot more radiation around here.

INT: At your everyday job?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: Do you think that you might have any long-term...that there might be any kind of long term effects on your health?

NAR: The official report is something like that there may be one or five, I think, excess cancer deaths in the area. And that sounds very high at first, until you realize that cancer deaths are probably hundreds of thousands in this area. Reports in many years to come. So the chance of hitting me is zilch basically.

INT: So you're not really worried about it?

NAR: No.

INT: Were any other aspects of your life affected by Three Mile Island?

NAR: I would say no. Probably could think of something later on, but...

INT: Anything about the community, do you think, was there any way that it was affected by Three Mile Island?

NAR: Well, there was concern. There meetings and this and that. I don't know what the long term effects will be. Psychology I guess it was some harm done. Certainly debate started on the use of nuclear power. That sort of thing.

INT: Do you have any ideas on the psychology effects of Three Mile Island on the community?

NAR: I really don't... you know I hear about them, but I really haven't to tell you the truth thought much about it.

INT: You haven't come across anything in your own patients or...?

NAR: Well I don't really see patients to discuss things with them. Just diagnosis by x-rays, so I really don't get talking to them.

INT: Do you yourself have any kinds of compunctions about the food or milk from the area?

NAR: I was worried a little about radioactive iodine in milk. You know, when I heard iodine going out – that sort of thing. But the levels were very low.

INT: Do you, for instance, drink any milk around here that might have...?

NAR: There would be no radiation left to speak of. Especially considering that they measured it and it was low. So in 8 days, if it's iodine 131, 8 days half of it's gone, 8 days another half is gone. So, no, I have no problems.

INT: Did you think about your own death during the time? Or that of anybody else? Did you think about dying?

NAR: I don't think I really thought that much about that. I must have, but I don't really recall thinking much about it. More about it lately. For I think, just for other reasons. It just dawned on me that I'm 33 recently. And someday I'm going to die – that sort of thing. But that – I really think is unrelated to Three Mile Island. Because you see death around here everyday, or frequently. And somebody tells you that the Beatles were in 1961, and that was 17 years ago or whatever. And you think, my God.

INT: 1964 – I was a sophomore in High School.

NAR: And I was a freshman in college. And it's amazing to think that is old news.

INT: Did you think that you would survive? Did you have a feeling about something that you would survive?

NAR: I didn't have any really bad feelings, if that's what you mean. That I was going to die – no I didn't.

INT: I remember before we were talking about images of disasters and things. Did you have any particular image – what did you think about when it happened?

NAR: I don't quite know what you mean, other than images I've said of what could be the worst thing?

INT: Did it make you think about anything in your own past?

NAR: As related to past tragedy?

INT: Yeah, did it make you think at the time, boy this is just like...?

NAR: I don't think I did think that. I don't know for sure. But I don't think that I did say, oh this is just like such and such. If I did, I've forgotten it. It's interesting, I wish I could remember what I thought about that.

INT: Well, we'll think about it here. Did you think about God at all during the incident?

NAR: I don't think I did think a lot about God – like why is He letting this happen and that sort of thing. I don't think that really came up.

INT: Did you pray?

NAR: I don't remember.

INT: Did you feel that you'd had any certain responsibilities – responsibilities to your family, your job, to your community

NAR: Well, here I felt that I had some responsibilities, although it was hard to say exactly what. Recently I got the title Radiation Safety Officer, which basically means that I just check the radiation levels we get here on the job, look for any gross problems like ways people are getting irradiated where they shouldn't be. When they're taking x-rays or if a patient is getting radiated unnecessarily for technical reasons, which is sort of a big jump from responsibility for the community. Like I said, I thought we should know what radiation levels were around here, so we made some tests and that sort of thing. I sat in on a meeting where we tried to figure out what we should do as far as the community, their asking about radiation or if somebody comes and says, "Is my radiation level high?" – that sort of thing. That's pretty much...

INT: Did you feel any conflicts at all in responsibilities, for instance between your job and your family?

NAR: I had thought about what if the level gets high and what role I should play versus going with my family. And it was hard to say exactly what role you could play. If there was a huge radiation, if there was a huge amount of radiation in the area that you should get out quickly, what could I actually add my staying. Probably wasn't too much you to that. The services you'd need were the police getting people out, watching for vandalism. And who's to say how long you should have National Guard watching out for vandalism or helping to get patients out of the hospital, that sort of thing.

INT: Was there anything going on here during that time here at the hospital?

NAR: We did have some meetings, like I said. About what to do. I can remember one of the nurse's husband said he wanted his wife let go so she could get out of the area immediately, and every question was about what to do, about phone questions that came in, or quote, could I be checked for radiation, unquote. That sort of thing.

INT: Did you get a lot of those calls?

NAR: No, we didn't. I don't think we got a lot.

INT: Was the functioning of the hospital at all any way changed?

NAR: Yes, it was. We tried not to take elective surgery and non-emergency patients. Not so we could have our hospital empty but actually so we could take hospitals closer in. Since we were outside of 20 miles it was felt that if something happened we'd probably be pretty safe here anyhow. And that's probably more realistic than these images of what could be the worst thing going on. So if they needed to evacuate a Harrisburg Hospital out here we would have some beds available. So that's why it was a limited time that they limited admissions.

INT: Was there an official hospital directives?

NAR: Yeah actually, there were notes I guess passed by the administration to try to limit surgery and admissions.

INT: Who would I be able to talk to for instance that was in charge of it at that time that would know about the directives?

NAR: Ok well, the president of the staff was involved in that. That will be Ivan Beechey.

INT: Ivan Beechey?

NAR: Right. He's a physician. And the hospital administrators. The head administrator is Nick Traciew. Jim Woods. More approachable in that he's more our age. He's the assistant administrator. As far as those meetings – by way of explanation – actually we had this head radiologist which is Herm Groman, meet with the head of surgery that was Jim Johnston, and the head of nursing and the administrator. And I was invited along because I was Radiation Safety Officer and such. Which I guess there wasn't a whole lot to do and... with respect to everything that was going on here community wise. You might want to talk would be Jim Johnston. He's a surgeon who was involved in some of the planning.

INT: Remember we were talking a little while ago about the conception of this disaster or near disaster or crisis or incident, do you think that it was more or less frightening than another type of disaster such as a flood or hurricane or war...?

NAR: It's more frightening to most people because radiation is something you can't see or smell or hear. Sort of like the Invisible... whatever... is it here or isn't it here? Are the Russians among us or whatever. Obviously when all said and done, actually what happened physically was very little, as opposed to a flood where people are killed. So in a way it was less frightening for me.

INT: Do you have any ideas about how it would be best to behave in a situation like this? And sort of ethical or moral or religious ideas?

NAR: I don't know quite...

INT: Well..?

NAR: Rationally and calmly and so on and so forth. Nothing is really coming strongly.

INT: Did any kinds of things...remember I was asking you about things from your past that you were thinking about...if there were any other experiences that were brought to mind by this crisis? We didn't get to far with that.

NAR: Maybe... I lost my memory.

INT: Did any TV shows or movies come to mind?

NAR: No.

INT: Did you find yourself singing any kinds of songs?

NAR: I like these questions but I don't really remember anything that I would have. I may have thought of "On the Beach." I bet you I did think of "On the Beach." There's always that impressive scene where the city in daytime nothing is moving or they look over the bridge.

INT: But you can't really remember thinking about it?

NAR: But I really don't really remember thinking that. Too bad...

INT: Did you have any kinds of daydreams during that time?

NAR: Sort of thoughts, no not more than what I was telling you about what could be the worst possible thing. Including one I didn't say was if the water got contaminated so you couldn't even drink anything. Be like (unintelligible) a bottle of water. You wouldn't find any in the supermarket by the time you figured that out everybody else would of.

INT: Did you have any sleeping dreams if not daydreams?

NAR: Don't remember any. And I don't remember waking up with any dreams.

INT: Was your sleep pattern at all changed during that time?

NAR: No.

INT: Did you notice anything in the people around you during the incident that they were changing in any way?

NAR: I think just that everybody was a little nervous about what was going on. Because it was the topic of conversation, obviously.

INT: Was it sort of the main topic?

NAR: Oh yeah, sure. It was one of the main topics. Because you couldn't help it. Every 2 minutes they were on the news again...

INT: How were they reacting to it, were people really scared or were they sort of looking at it as, well it doesn't really look that bad...?

NAR: I think people were very concerned.

INT: Did you notice any kind of joking, were people trying to laugh it off at all?

NAR: I think there was. I really don't remember exactly, but I think there was.

INT: Can you remember any particular jokes, anything that anybody brought in to you—funny stories?

NAR: Only thing I do remember is one is a radiation meter was being sold by some company, it was in the paper, it looked like it was just a piece of film for a high price. And just saying how people were getting ripped off by that. Somebody brought that in for us to see.

INT: I think that's actually... I think we can just drop it there because you've got to run off to a meeting.

NAR: I guess I wasn't affected very badly, when they talk about the psychological health, I sometimes wonder why, but I guess a lot of people were a lot more scared than I was.

INT: How do you think that people sort of took it, do you think that you reacted well?

NAR: I don't know what well is... to the best of their knowledge they probably reacted well. A lot of people obviously did leave the area.

INT: Did friends of yours leave the area, do you know anybody who did?

NAR: I think some of them people on our block left. The wives would leave temporarily. I don't think the husbands left. If they had some family to see they went and saw them, why not. It's a good time to leave. I don't know of any whole families that left for a long time.

INT: Anybody close to you leave? Good friends?

NAR: Like some of the families on the block. Like the wives and kids left.

INT: Was anybody joking with them about why they are leaving or anything when they came back that they were wrong to have left?

NAR: I don't think so.

INT: Because I noticed that among some of the kids at school, they laughed at some of the other kids who left...

NAR: I'm sure that happened.

INT: But I was just wondering if adults that was at all concerned?

NAR: I don't think that I have a whole lot of social interaction in the time to tell you the truth, to have known that it happened. In other words, I don't think we were at peoples' houses a lot. Just mostly at home doing nothing with the kids. Boring life.