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Keagen Brooks-Torres
Seattle University

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Recommended Citation

Brooks-Torres, Keagen, "2022-11-09 Monsanto Accused of Medically Compromising Children in Monroe" (2022). *The Spectator Online*. 778.

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The Spectator • November 9, 2022 • <https://seattlespectator.com/2022/11/09/monsanto-accused-of-medically-compromising-children-in-monroe/>

Monsanto Accused of Medically Compromising Children in Monroe

Keagen Brooks-Torres, Volunteer Reporter

The parents, students and staff at Sky Valley Education Center, located in Monroe, Wash., are far from the only people who have watched their health suffer from the effects of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a toxic chemical compound. However, the recent \$275 million verdict for a case against Monsanto, the primary producer of PCBs in the U.S., could set a precedent for how the future of those responsible for PCB contamination might look.

In a series of trials taking place at the King County Courthouse, more than 200 parents, students and staff have sued Monsanto for severe health issues caused by the PCBs. The PCBs Monsanto produced have been found in light fixtures and window caulking throughout the Sky Valley Education Center. Although the Monroe School District assured faculty and parents that the old building was safe, the light fixtures began smoking, catching fire and dripping a yellow, oily tar-like substance. This, combined with the rampant health issues suddenly faced by people in the building made the contamination infeasible to ignore.

PCBs are known for their potential to cause lifelong health issues. They are referred to as forever chemicals due to how long it takes for them to break down in both the environment and the human body. Although PCBs were banned in 1979, they are still present in buildings constructed beforehand such as Sky Valley. Plaintiffs argued that Monsanto was legally responsible for the severe health consequences of those exposed.

Aiyannah Kasoto, a first-year marketing major at Seattle University who attended the opening statements of the most recent Sky Valley trial, thinks that Monsanto doesn't have a strong defense.



Courtesy of Tingey Injury Law Firm

“I think that throughout the opening statements, Monsanto was trying to create their whole argument off of nothing, and they were just going on about things that weren’t related. I was thinking to myself, ‘what are they even talking about?’ They were basically saying that PCBs cause problems in people, but they’re not dangerous enough for [Monsanto] to be in the wrong,” Kasoto said.

Poor ventilation, combined with inaction from the school district allowed PCBs to fester within the building and seriously impacted the health of those inside, particularly women and young children. Early puberty, rashes, cracked skin, cysts, sinus issues, autoimmune disorders, thyroid disorders and cancer were only a few of the physical health problems inflicted upon the parents, students and staff at Sky Valley. Their symptoms varied in intensity and quantity from person to person. Mental impairment was another issue caused by the chemical exposure, made especially problematic for adults who noticed major differences in their cognitive abilities.

David Carpenter, professor of environmental health sciences and director of the Institute of Health and the Environment at the University at Albany, who has spent his career studying the effects of PCBs on humans, takes particular interest in the way that PCBs impact the human brain.

“PCBs reduce IQ, reduce ability to learn and remember and increase the risk of abnormal neural behavioral characteristics, shortened attention span, things like that. The remarkable thing is that just about every disease that you can look at is influenced by PCB exposure,” Carpenter said.

While Wash. state law requires schools be tested for environmental hazards, they are not required to take action to mitigate those hazards, nor are they required to inform parents, students or staff. When Sky Valley was tested for PCB levels, the tests were done after remediation, with windows open and fans on, providing inaccurate measurements of the original exposure levels. Additionally, as Carpenter points out, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) alone cannot always hold companies accountable.

“The problem is that the EPA is always way behind the times. There’s some good people there, but they don’t pay attention to the latest research. The EPA has a standard for PCBs in the air in schools, they imply that between 200 and 600 nanograms per cubic meter is safe for children in a school. That’s just ludicrous. That’s way larger than the evidence shows for serious health effects,” Carpenter said.

Monsanto has emphasized inaction from the Monroe School District in their defense, but Monsanto is legally liable for the health effects even if they were unaware of them.

“It’s so easy for companies to just hide behind other parts of society like school systems, trying to put blame on individuals for what they’re going through,” Eliza Blythe, a first-year environmental studies major at Seattle U, said.

Another Sky Valley trial is set to take place at King County Courthouse in January. The results of the series of trials in the Northwest will echo across the rest of the U.S., and set important precedents in American law.