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Rare deadly tumors show up in Pratt & Whitney's East Hartford workers, too.

By Carole Bass

Matt Hoey called his wife in tears from the Madison Ford dealer where he'd taken her car. A retired engineer with three master's degrees, he couldn't remember why he was there. "I said, 'Don't you remember, you're going to get the windshield wiper fixed?'" recalls his widow, Pixie.

"He said, 'What windshield wiper?'"

A scan found the tumor. Surgery confirmed it was glioblastoma multiforme, a fast-growing brain cancer. It's terminal. Experimental treatments kept Matt alive for 18 months. He died in October 1999 at age 66.

Gilman Roussel was driving to Rochester for the birth of a grandchild. A toll collector kept repeating the amount, but Gilman couldn't figure out how much money to give her. When he and his wife, Lorraine, arrived at their son's house, Gilman kept bumping into door frames. He was

diagnosed with glioblastoma before he returned home to East Hartford.

Edmund Plass was in the basement when he suddenly dropped a blowtorch. He'd lost the use of his arm. His family thought it was a heart attack. But it was a seizure, caused by glioblastoma.

Fred Tarbox was renovating his dream house near the harbor in Gloucester, Mass. He loved his retirement: shrimping and clamming with the grandchildren, refinishing furniture, taking the train to Boston to shop. In June 2000, he thought he had a sinus infection. It was glioblastoma. By the end of September, he was gone.

Combined, the four men spent roughly 140 years at Pratt & Whitney's East Hartford plant. Their families can't help but wonder whether something in the workplace killed them.

Matt Hoey. James Long. Joseph Ouellette. Eugene Petrini. Edmund Plass. Cheryl Prete. Gilman Roussel. Fred Tarbox.

All lost their lives to brain cancer. All were long-time employees of Pratt & Whitney. All left loved ones who still grieve them.

If you've been following the local news, you may have heard this refrain before. Pratt & Whitney, under the guidance of the state health department, has launched a massive investigation into brain cancer at the giant jet-engine maker. So far, investigators have confirmed 19 primary brain tumors--all fatal--at Pratt's North Haven plant.

But Matt Hoey, James Long, Joseph Ouellette, Eugene Petrini, Edmund Plass, Cheryl Prete, Gilman Roussel and Fred Tarbox didn't work in North Haven. They worked in East Hartford.

If you've been following the local news, you may also know that P&W has sold the North Haven plant. Hundreds of workers have already been moved out, with about 450 to 500 workers remaining. Probably by the end of the year, they will all move--to East Hartford.

Last summer, when the Department of Public Health asked Pratt to hire experts for a full-blown study, it had confirmed six cases of glioblastoma multiforme--a tumor that, nationally, strikes fewer than 3 in 100,000 people each year.

With little focus on East Hartford so far, the glioblastoma

count there already stands at eight.

(That doesn't include a glioblastoma victim who worked at Pratt for only two or three years in the early 1970s, or a longtime lab technician at the United Technologies Research Center in East Hartford, whose widow identifies him as a Pratt & Whitney employee. It's hard to directly compare cancer figures in East Hartford and North Haven because East Hartford had many more employees over the years.)

The Pratt & Whitney brain cancer investigation is just beginning. In addition to the 19 confirmed cases in North Haven, the health department reports another 22 cases among people who worked at Pratt's other Connecticut plants. Researchers don't yet know whether this seemingly large number of cases constitutes a statistical cluster. At the end of their projected three-to-four-year study, many questions may remain unanswered--including what made the Pratt workers sick.

But some things are already clear:

- The number of brain tumors is too big to ignore.
- The problem is not limited to North Haven.
- And while Pratt & Whitney's factories are far cleaner and safer than in decades past, workers are still exposed to toxic chemicals. What those chemicals are doing to their health, nobody knows.



Pratt & Whitney

Fred Tarbox assembled experimental jet engines. Gilman Roussel was an experimental machinist, making parts for those engines. Edmund Plass ended his career--and his life,

just short of age 62--in a "low-level white-collar" job, but worked as an experimental machinist before that.

"He was in the shop most of the time at Pratt. Regardless of the color of his collar, he was on the shop floor," says his daughter, Chris Plass.

Matt Hoey had an office in Pratt's engineering building but spent a lot of time on the shop floor, doing quality control on the turbine blades he designed. James Long was also an engineer; his daughter, Diane Evans, doesn't know where he worked within Pratt's sprawling East Hartford complex.

Experimental machining was in an area known as J Building. Experimental assembly was in an adjoining area, K Building. It has since moved to the Middletown plant, making room for the turbine blade work that has already begun moving up from North Haven.

Pratt & Whitney machinists use lubricating oils to keep temperatures down as they grind engine parts. They use solvents to clean the greasy parts. Studies have found elevated rates of brain cancer among people who worked with both substances.

In the old days, Pratt veterans say, workers ground and cleaned parts without protective masks or gloves. Oil formed a mist that sprayed everywhere, mixing with metal dust and coating ceilings and air ducts. (See "[Worked to Death](#)" and "[Oil City Revisited](#)," *Advocate*, Aug. 2, 2001.)

Most of the widows and other family members know little about the work their husbands and fathers did. But it's clear from interviews with current and former employees that solvents were everywhere.

PIXIE HOEY PHOTO



Above: Engineer Matt Hoey, before cancer.

Below: Pratt widow Pixie Hoey, "My husband didn't deserve to die of brain cancer from his workplace, if it poisoned him."



"The thing that stands out to me was the cleaning fluid," says Joe Hoey, one of Matt's five sons and himself a Pratt & Whitney employee during part of the 1980s. "It was literally everywhere. They handed out cans of it, and we used it with our bare hands. You'd pour it in a rag and wipe down parts."

That was true at all three Pratt plants he worked in, Joe says. He was never employed at East Hartford but did a couple of short stints there.

"Your hands would come away parched and dry like you wouldn't believe. It was in the air," Joe says. "My dad and I had a couple of conversations about that. He said it'd give you a headache. He was a jacket-and-tie guy, so the fact that he mentioned it meant that it was something that he used."

He's not sure what the chemical was, but thinks it was either TCE--trichloroethylene--or perc: tetrachloroethylene, also called perchloroethylene and

PCE. Perc is a suspected carcinogen. Many researchers have long suspected TCE of causing cancer, but it hasn't been classified that way.

The smell was hard to escape, Joe remembers. "The cans weren't airtight and it evaporated. The plant itself had an odor: acrid, chemical, almost burnt. It assaulted your senses."

Fred Tarbox used to come home wearing that odor.



Fred Tarbox used to come home from his assembly job reeking of chemicals.

"He was very involved with chemicals," says his widow, Kay. "You could smell it on his clothes--horrible."

In addition to the hand-held cans of solvent, the East Hartford plant used to have open degreaser tanks on the shop floor. So did North Haven and the now defunct Southington plant.

Ron Kolpak worked at Southington and died of glioblastoma 10 years ago. He was just 37.

"My husband's machine was right next to an open degreaser tank," says Linda Kolpak. She works in packaging at Pratt in East Hartford.

"My husband's friends come by and talk to me," she says. "They say, 'We used to wash our hands in those tanks. We didn't even know.' They talk about how their skin would tingle and turn white."

One East Hartford sheet metal worker who asks not to be identified remembers that when he started in the late '70s, "a lot of guys were cutting asbestos gaskets" without protective masks. If a worker was bothered by fumes or metal dust, "you would have to try to get a respirator. But it was like pulling nails out of a stone."

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration has cited Pratt & Whitney's Connecticut facilities for 196 violations on 39 occasions since 1972, according to the agency's online database. Thirty of those violations were in East Hartford. OSHA inspectors showed up at the East Hartford plant just last month in response to a complaint about silica. That inspection is still open, with no citations so far.

Much has improved since the bad old days, say the sheet metal worker, Kolpak and others. But not everything.

The degreaser tanks have been removed or covered. P&W has switched to less toxic solvents. In some areas, workers use only alcohol to clean parts, disposing of alcohol-soaked rags in special sealed drums. Safety glasses and rubber gloves are mandatory. Plexiglas doors enclosed the machines, containing the grinding dust, Kolpak says.

But "there's still a lot more room for improvement," she says. "You've got to remember it's a factory. Would I want my son or grandson to work there? Absolutely not."

A couple of weeks ago, Kolpak was in a manufacturing area in L Building. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There's oils and solvents that are just clinging and dripping from the fans. That's how much is in the air. This is what these guys work with every day."

But when she asked the people who worked in that area, they shrugged it off. "It's their livelihood," she says. "My husband didn't even see it coming. These guys kinda do see it coming, but it's like, 'We're going to die of something.'"

A longtime Pratt worker who asks not to be identified says exposure to toxic chemicals forced him to transfer out of the plastics lab just last summer.

"I was working with epoxy resin, stuff we had never worked with. I was never informed properly of the material. I had an allergic reaction, ended up going to the emergency room. I had a rash all over my body, burning in my mouth, my eyes were burning."

He went back and forth between work and various doctors for "maybe a month and a half" until his symptoms finally cleared up.

"They should have informed me to wear a respirator working with this stuff," he says. "There was no formal training, working with all the different chemicals. All the time I was down there [in the plastics lab], everything was passed on from previous workers."

After that incident, he says, health and safety specialists descended on the lab. "They removed 30 or 40 different types of chemicals, really cleaned the place up."

A couple of months earlier, "some guy was burning epoxy in the [plastics lab] oven. He put too much epoxy on the part, and it spilled over onto the cart. He did what they did in the old days: turned up the oven to burn off the extra

epoxy. It fumigated the whole place. They called the fire department," which shut down the oven and opened the windows.

Now this employee is back doing sheet metal work. The area is much cleaner and safer than when he left it seven or eight years ago, he says.

Still, he sees a need for more health and safety training and enforcement. "It's still up to the operator to check the [manufacturer's safety data] sheets and make sure you're protecting yourself" against hazardous materials. Someone else should also be making sure line workers take precautions, he suggests.

Pratt spokesman Mark Sullivan says he's unfamiliar with the specific conditions and incidents these workers cite. In general, he says, "We have a large and aggressive environmental health and safety program. We make a very concerted, sincere effort to have high standards. We're not perfect, and I'm sure in any given department at certain times there's room for improvement. We're just going to keep after that."

The Cluster Busters

Nobody knows what causes brain cancer. Some studies have found higher rates in certain industries: petroleum, agriculture, plastics and, in some cases, metalworking. Other studies link human brain tumors to specific chemical exposures, including organic solvents, formaldehyde and lubricating oils.

Last spring, Yale epidemiologist Tongzhang Zheng published an occupational study of 375 cases of brain cancer in Iowa. He found an increased risk for, among others, sheet metalworkers and workers with high exposure to solvents.

The sobering job of trying to figure out why Pratt & Whitney workers keep dying of brain cancer falls to researchers Gary Marsh and Nurtan Esmen. Marsh, the lead investigator, is a biostatistician at the University of Pittsburgh. Esmen is an occupational health expert at the University of Oklahoma. Both scientists have long experience investigating links between cancer and industry.



The researchers have their own links to industry:



Researcher Gary Marsh will head the Pratt cancer study.

Much of their work is funded, directly or through trade associations, by the companies they're investigating.

The Pratt & Whitney study is no exception. The state Department of Public Health started looking into brain cancer deaths at the North Haven plant at the

request of the machinists union there. After a preliminary investigation confirmed eight primary brain tumors--six of them glioblastoma multiforme, a rare and aggressive tumor--the health department asked Pratt to hire outside experts. Pratt chose Marsh from a list recommended by the health department and the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, or NIOSH.

The arrangement raises questions about the researchers' independence. Their contract is with Pratt & Whitney, one of the state's biggest employers, with lots of economic and political clout. Health department spokesman Bill Gerrish says the agency will "oversee" the study. But according to both Gerrish and Marsh, the state's role is not supervisory. The department and NIOSH will review Marsh's study design and make suggestions, which he can incorporate or not.

At a company-sponsored meeting with relatives of cancer victims last month, Marsh and the health department's Mary Lou Fleissner emphasized the researchers' independence from Pratt. Family members interviewed afterward were happy with the meeting.

"If the study does not meet our satisfaction, we will make that known," declares Gerrish. "Our role is to assure that this is a scientifically sound study." And, he notes, the results will be peer-reviewed and published in a scientific journal.

But Gerrish is unsure whether the health department will have access to Marsh's data, which would allow the state to run its own calculations.

"Someone [has to be able] to look over the assumptions that go into a study, make sure there's sufficient data, be able to redo the calculations," says Rich Gross, an occupational health lawyer from Orange who represents one of the North Haven widows in her workers compensation claim against Pratt & Whitney. "If there are going to be closed-door meetings between Dr. Marsh and

Pratt, Pratt's going to be able to control the outcome of the study. And if they don't, there's going to be the public perception."

The health department itself made a similar point in an unrelated June 2000 report, *Occupational Disease in Connecticut*. Stressing the need for doctors--not just companies--to notify authorities about on-the-job illness, the paper notes: "there are a number of economic disincentives for employers to report occupational diseases and injuries."

The epidemiology experts face a monumental task: assembling a mountain of data from company records, insurance claims, tumor registries, family members and other sources, then trying to make sense of it all. Their work, which Gary Marsh expects to begin in earnest this spring, could involve seven current and former Pratt facilities and tens of thousands of workers.

The company now employs 13,000 people in Connecticut, down from 25,000 in the early '80s and as many as 40,000 in earlier decades. Nobody knows how many have worked at Pratt since its founding in 1925.

In the end, Marsh says, the numbers could prove inconclusive. If he does find a brain cancer cluster at one or more Pratt plants, he may or may not be able to pin it to work conditions.

Two North Haven widows, Carol Shea and Kate Greco, have filed workers compensation claims. The company denied them, saying there's no proof that working at Pratt caused John Shea and John Greco to get glioblastoma. The widows are appealing the denials and trying to put together evidence linking their husbands' livelihoods to their deaths. They're encouraging other survivors of Pratt brain cancers to do the same. But they can't hire their own epidemiologists and do their own investigation, so their cases may depend heavily on Marsh's study.

If the cancers were "somehow work-related, we should be compensated. Especially if they knew things were hazardous," says Lorraine Roussel, the widow of East Hartford machinist Gilman Roussel. "The pension I'm receiving doesn't have a cost-of-living increase. A lot of the things my husband used to do around here, now I have to pay someone to do them."

More important, she says, "I hope that somehow conditions improve" for current Pratt workers.

Family members are encouraged by the investigation.

"They really are trying to get to the bottom of this," says Linda Kolpak, widow of cancer victim Ron Kolpak, who worked at the Southington Pratt & Whitney facility.

Pixie Hoey, widow of East Hartford engineer Matt Hoey, is skeptical that the study will conclude that working at Pratt caused brain cancer.

"I get the feeling that when you're up against a big company, nothing's going to come of it," she says. "But if the company is more responsible and more careful to prevent this in the future, I think that's really all any of us want."

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