

Terminal illness

by S.L. Inniss

HOLLY MURPHY walks into her fourth floor office, reaches over her left shoulder and hits the switch to turn on her Sperry computer. Green luminous letters appear on the screen signalling the start of her day at the Victoria General Hospital.

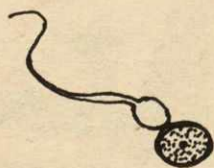
The 21-year-old secretary for the Public Relations department at the VG is typical of today's workers with her shrug about working on a Video Display Unit (VDU). This at a time when the controversy over their safety has been renewed in Canada and the United States, and when new questions are being raised about what was once thought harmless; the lower-level non-ionizing radiation produced by them.

Murphy is one of thousands of Nova Scotia workers — mostly women — who now work on the machines full time. There are now over 2.5 million units in use across Canada, and 30 million in the U.S. At the VG alone, 1400 people have been trained on VDUs in the past two years. Her job as a secretary demands the VDU, and Murphy finds it efficient.

"They're everywhere," she says simply. "And a lot easier (than working on a typewriter)." She is not worried about their effects.

Brian Shorter, Director of Management Engineering at the VG, concurs, saying that radiation from VDUs is less worrisome than other problems, like posture, eye strain, and the like.

Across town at Purdys Wharf, National Sea employee Beverley Richardson trains people on computers for their office which has adopted them en masse in the last few years. To her mind, there is more harm from many food additives than from what comes from her IBM screen.



Such a laissez-faire posture has not always been the norm. In 1979 four out of seven VDU operators working in the same department of the *Toronto Star* newspaper gave birth to infants with defects. An inquiry was ordered by the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild, and industry and government officials rushed to the VDU's defence.

"There is not a single scrap of evidence to indicate any danger from VDU radiation," said Gerald Caplain, of the Toronto Health Department's advocacy unit, expressing the dominant opinion of the government.

The attitude of the computer industry was already set. As early as 1975, the year computers were first installed in many offices, IBM vice-president Bill Laughlin told *Business Week* magazine: "People will adapt nicely to office systems — if their arms are broken, and we're in the twisting stage now."

During the two years after the *Toronto Star* incident, seven more reported clusters of birth defects and miscarriages involving women VDU operators occurred in Canada and the USA.

Here in Nova Scotia, according to one official with the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union (NSGEU), who spoke on the condition they not be identified, a small cluster of birth defects occurred among VDU operators at the VG in 1984-85.

Reports were of three or more babies born with malformities to workers there. But there was "no way to prove it... everything (at the VG) would be kept under wraps."



The VG's Brian Shorter calls such reports "anecdotal gossip," and blames a "sensational press" for promoting the idea that VDU radiation and electrical fields which come from the transformer unit behind the screen are health hazards.



The safety group had never measured Holly Murphy's terminal in her two years with the hospital. Murphy says she would work on it even if she were pregnant.

Nevertheless, as a result of pressure by the NSGEU, which covers workers at the VG, a collective agreement was signed in 1984 with the government that allows workers who spend 50 per cent of their time or more on VDUs to bill their employer for eye tests, and also allows for obligatory transfers of employees away from the machines if they request it.

According to Shorter, a safety group tours the VG to demonstrate to workers the facts, and measure with a scintillation meter the VDU fields for those employees "who may have hysterical opinions."



Whether or not the meter was used, Ted Dalglish of the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Fitness had doubts about it. A scintillation meter is used for measuring ionizing radiation — like X-rays — says Dalglish, and not the non-ionizing fields produced by things like computers, televisions, or hair dryers.

"You're mixing apples and oranges," said Dalglish from his office (uncrowded by a VDU). You can get a measurement (from a VDU) on a scintillation meter, he said, but also interference. Dalglish recommends rather a Halliday H3001 meter for measuring the low-level radiation in question, which comes from the transformer behind the screen.

As part of his recommendations, made after intensive research on the subject in Europe and Canada, scientist Karel Marha recommended in 1982 for the Canadian Centre of Occupational Health and Safety that workers locate themselves at least one meter from the VDU, that VDUs not be set up back to front in an office, and that transferred pregnant workers "not sit close to the side or rear of a terminal."

More recent publications from the centre acknowledge the vacuum of hard research, and maintain the topic is "very controversial."

IBM feels the newer climate, and has started marketing shielded VDUs in Sweden to comply with a 1988 law there which lowered acceptable electrical emissions from them. A Norwegian firm, as well, is now trying to market shielded units in America, although not yet in Canada.

For Holly Murphy, in her fourth floor office, the issue is light — for now.

"I've been here for two years and I haven't changed, not yet anyway."