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Reading, writing &

waste management

by Jeff Harrington

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) are not just "in service" at Dal, as stated last week by a Physical Plant official. This week, Peter Howitt, Manager of Engineering Services, Physical Plant and Planning, revealed that there are also PCB's in storage.

"Eight or ten years ago, there was a leak in a transformer. Rags and paper towels were used to clean it up and they are kept in two five-gallon drums, which are sealed. I've looked at them and they weigh less than five pounds. The federal government knows they exist and they check them once a year. They are kept in a concrete electrical vault on campus, which is temperature-controlled and ventilated to the outside."

He stressed that the vault was protected by several high-security doors.

"We also have a 45-gallon drum of PCB oil that was intended for filling transformers, but was never opened."

The remaining 150 litres of PCB's at Dal are used as coolants

for electrical transformers in a number of buildings on campus. They were part of standard equipment when several buildings, including the Life Science Building, were constructed in the early 1970s, says Howitt.

Howitt says the coolants are in sealed transformers "in designated electrical distribution rooms away from the public". He says the rooms are kept locked, and only authorized personnel are permitted inside. The rooms

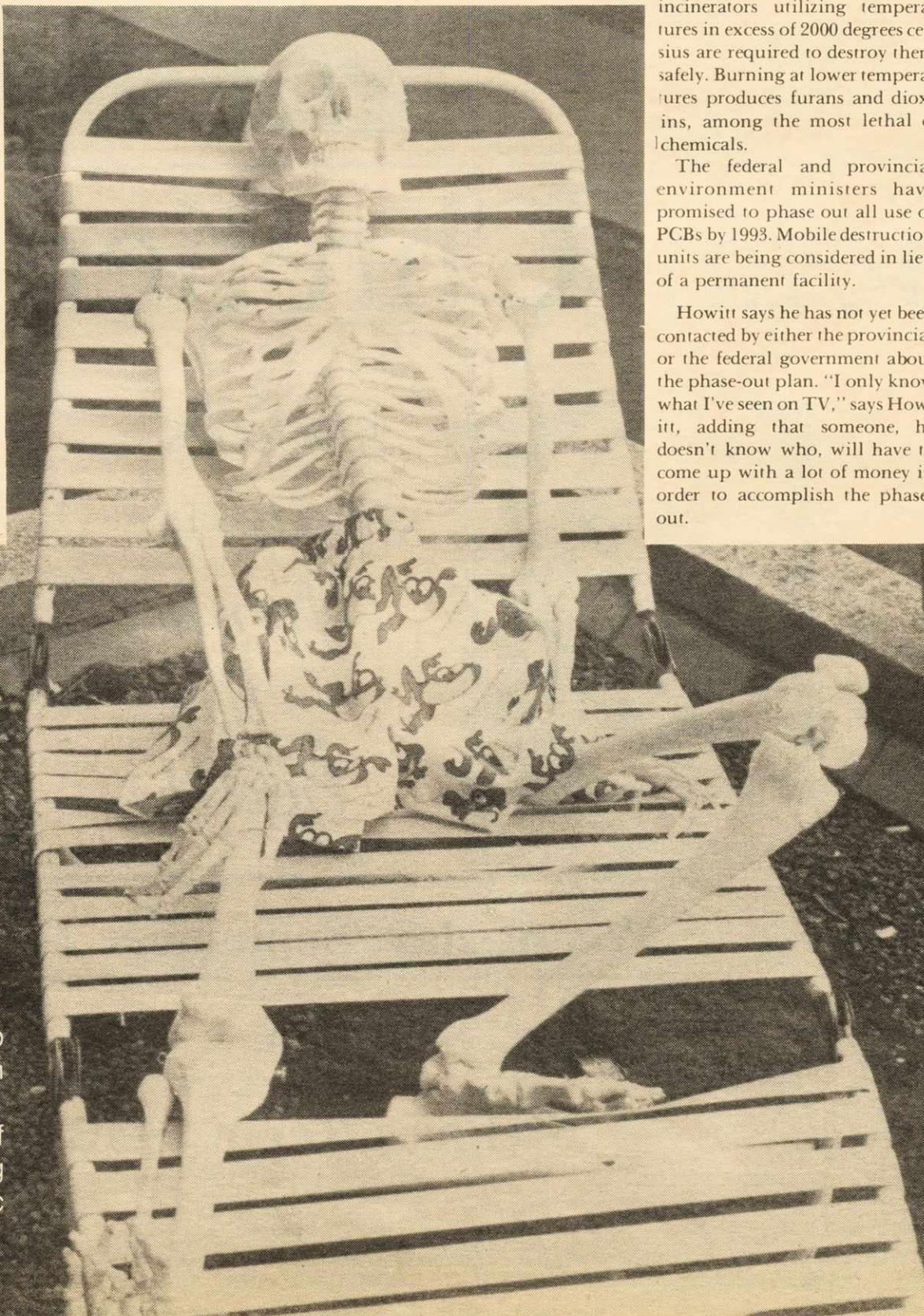
are built with concrete floors surrounded by raised "lips" designed to contain any leakage.

Howitt declined to reveal the specific locations where PCBs are in use at Dal, citing safety and security concerns, including vandalism.

PCBs do not break down in the environment. Sophisticated incinerators utilizing temperatures in excess of 2000 degrees celsius are required to destroy them safely. Burning at lower temperatures produces furans and dioxins, among the most lethal of chemicals.

The federal and provincial environment ministers have promised to phase out all use of PCBs by 1993. Mobile destruction units are being considered in lieu of a permanent facility.

Howitt says he has not yet been contacted by either the provincial or the federal government about the phase-out plan. "I only know what I've seen on TV," says Howitt, adding that someone, he doesn't know who, will have to come up with a lot of money in order to accomplish the phase-out.



Just how safe is it to absorb the rays floating around on campus?

A university study says lack of chemical storage is leaving potentially carcinogenic materials in campus labs.

See story on page 3.