

# Casino Workers Get MCS from Pesticides

**Two dozen employees at a casino got multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) after frequent spraying of their work area. The casino fired the sick workers.**

*Keywords: pesticide, chemical sensitivity, MCS, sick building, controversy, hostile physicians, workers compensation, lawsuit*

## The incident

The April 16, 1990 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a brief story that about fifty employees at a casino suddenly got sick. About 19 people were treated at a hospital. The employees complained of symptoms like a combined flu and hangover, with dizziness, nausea, disorientation, inability to think clearly, etc.

The authorities took blood and urine samples from the employees, but found nothing. They took air samples in the casino and tested the carpeting, but found nothing unusual. They ruled out a viral infection. The cause was a mystery.

## Two years later

The *San Francisco Examiner* published a major article about four employees whose lives were permanently ruined by the casino incident. All four were card dealers in the same section of the large casino by Lake Tahoe.

Their symptoms were typical for MCS, including problems concentrating, respiratory problems, dizziness and intolerance to a wide range of chemical products. Some also had seizures.

They all lost their jobs because of their illnesses. A total of 24 employees had to leave, of which only three received compensation from the casino. The rest were given a raw deal – even people who'd worked for the casino for a dozen years. Some subsisted on public assistance or help from friends and family.

The relations between the employees and the casino were now frosty. The employees believed what happened was a botched pesticide application. The casino was having problems with roaches and had sprayed the areas around the card pits every other week. Apparently the ventilation system wasn't sufficient. The casino denied any wrongdoing and hired a consulting firm that blamed the problem on "stress," and "fear of the unknown" as major factors.

The medical community was divided. Two physicians supported the pesticide theory and tried to help the sick workers. But others were dismissive. One of the sick workers was told at the local hospital that “Shaking is not going to kill you. Get dressed and get out of here.”

### **Winning in court**

The ex-employees tried filing federal workers compensation claims, but they were all rejected after a report by two physicians failed to support their case.

Then two separate lawsuits were filed. One was immediately thrown out by the judge.

The cases were eventually combined and wound their way through the court system. In January 1995 the Nevada Supreme Court ruled in favor of 23 employees from the casino.

### **Sources**

*Mysterious Ailment Hits Casino Workers*, Mark Evans, San Francisco Chronicle, April 6, 1990.

*Casino hit by mystery illness*, Eric Brazil, The San Francisco Examiner, April 5, 1992.

*Chemical illnesses growing*, John G. Edwards, Las Vegas Review Journal, March 19, 1995.

*Acquired intolerance to solvents following pesticide/solvent exposure in a building: a new group of workers at risk for multiple chemical sensitivities?*, James E. Cone and Thomas A. Sult, Toxicology and Industrial Health, July 1992 (abstract only).

We were unable to obtain permission to reprint the *Examiner* article, which provides photos and much more detail, including names of the employees, physicians, etc. The article is not available on the paper’s website.

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