

## San Rafael firm debunks myth that granite surfaces emit radon

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A San Rafael company says its radiation detector has what it takes to put a public scare to rest.

Recent news reports ranging from the New York Times to CBS News ignited fears of radon emissions from the granite that graces kitchens and foyers from Marin to Manhattan. One account indicated a doctor had granite countertops torn out after testing indicated they emitted a high level of radiation.

Officials at Berkeley Nucleonics Inc., headquartered on Kerner Boulevard in San Rafael, said their firm was deluged with calls after publicity that included a reference to their radiation meter.

The Times article on July 24 began with an anecdote about Dr. Lynn Sugarman, a New Jersey pediatrician who purchased a summer home in Lake George, N.Y., a couple of years ago. An inspection prior to the close of the sale revealed elevated levels of radon, a radioactive gas that can cause lung cancer.

Sugarman called a technician to find the source of the radon. He was "stopped in his tracks in the kitchen, which had richly grained cream, brown and burgundy granite countertops. His Geiger counter indicated that the granite was emitting radiation at levels 10 times or higher than those he had measured elsewhere in the house."

Sugarman said her first concern was that her pregnant daughter was coming to visit for the weekend. The technician told her to keep her daughter several feet away from the countertops.

"I had them ripped out that very day," Sugarman said.

An analysis

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for homeowners to worry that their kitchens emit radon. The radon that might exist in granite is so minimal that it trails other common exposures such as airplanes, X-rays and building materials. It's in drinking water, soil, rock and even sunshine.

"A granite countertop doesn't cause birth

defects or harm the health at normal levels," said Robert Corsetti, director of sales and marketing at Berkeley Nucleonics. "If you look for radiation, you're going to find it."

The Marble Institute of America calls the news stories misleading and instructs members on how to respond to consumer fears.

The Health Physics Society, a professional association based in McLean, Va., conducted a series of tests on granite at a distributorship and concluded that there is no reason to remove granite countertops from homes.

"If the granite countertop is determined to be a cause for concern, the most risk-reducing and cost-effective action to



Robert Corsetti, director of sales and marketing at the San Rafael-based Berkeley Nucleonics Corp., holds a personal radiation detector (left), which his company makes, and an old Civil Defense radiation meter. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)

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take would be to remove radon from the air throughout the home rather than remove the granite countertop," the society stated.

Granite suppliers in Marin say such scares occur periodically, but once they provide educational materials customers are satisfied.

"People in our industry don't take it lightly," said Frank Korn, owner of Carrera Marble Co. in San Rafael, noting that few granites emit radiation.

"It's only in limited granites," Korn said. "People who go up to Tahoe get more exposure from the granite there."

Mark Milteberger, owner of North Bay Stone Works in Novato, said his counters have less radon than his customers get from the sun. "Marinites are extremely intelligent," he said. "People think in Marin - they don't jump to conclusions."

At Berkeley Nucleonics, the palm-held radiation detectors are just a small part of the business, which supplies detection devices and surveillance systems to agencies in government, law enforcement and border patrol as well as the military.

The \$625 device is a portable radiation meter that detects and measures levels of radioactivity.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attack, Corsetti said the company had orders for hundreds of the palm-held detectors, but now orders average about 10 a month.

"It's been around so long it's like a standard on the menu," Corsetti said.

#### BERKELEY NUCLEONICS

- Address: 2955 Kerner Drive, San Rafael
- Business: The company develops electronic instruments for testing and measuring radiation.
- Founded: 1960 by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory engineer Mel Brown in Berkeley.
- Employees: 10, plus a network of sales representatives.

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An electronic dosimeter detects and computes radiation and the amount of exposure. Berkeley Nucleonics officials say there is no need for homeowners to worry that their kitchens emit radon. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)

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