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Three Cancer Deaths May Be Job-Related, B.F. Goodrich Says

Former Employees at Louisville
Plant All Were Involved in
Polyvinyl Chloride Operation

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

AKRON, Ohio — B. F. Goodrich Co., in a move that sent ripples through the plastics and chemicals industries, said it is investigating the possibility that the cancer deaths of three workers at a plant in Louisville, Ky., may be job-related.

Goodrich said that the workers affected were in its polyvinyl chloride operations, and that they died of angiosarcoma of the liver, a rare form of liver cancer.

Dr. Maurice N. Johnson, Goodrich's director of environmental health, said in the company's statement that he had recently received medical reports concerning the death of an employee in late December. "A review of medical records uncovered that two other employees had apparently died from the same cause—one in September 1971 and one in March 1973," the company said.

It was understood that a fourth death—in 1968—involving a more common form of liver cancer was considered outside the reasonable bounds of the "grouping" of the three recent deaths, all attributed to angiosarcoma.

Goodrich said it had informed Kentucky health officials and the Federal National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health that the company was investigating the possibility that the deaths might be "related to occupational causes."

Will Begin Investigation

Kentucky officials said they had just learned of the situation at the Louisville plant and had asked a medical expert to investigate. In Rockville, Md., a spokesman for NIOSH said a team of experts will arrive in Louisville this morning to begin an investigation.

Dr. Marcus M. Key, director of NIOSH, said the institute also will step up efforts to determine the extent of angiosarcoma in the U.S., and in foreign countries with similar manufacturing processes. A spokesman for the institute said the best information available shows 21 deaths per year in the U.S. attributable to angiosarcoma.

The recent deaths at Louisville, according to Dr. Johnson of Goodrich, involved workers in the company's vinyl products operations. An official of NIOSH said he understood that the workers had an average of 20 years' exposure to various chemicals and agents involved in vinyl operations.

Goodrich said it has been conducting a program to reduce exposure to hydrocarbons, particularly vinyl chloride, throughout its operations. Further steps to limit exposure and to describe the situation to workers in vinyl products production are being taken, the company said.

Goodrich also said it is providing medical examinations to all employees involved in any phase of vinyl chloride or polyvinyl chloride production, and is reviewing all its medical records of former or retired employees.

About 1,200 persons work at the Louisville plant, of whom about 270 are involved in vinyl products operations.

"Dropping of a Bomb"

Word that the deaths might be job-related spread quickly throughout several industries. Said Louis Beliczky, an industrial hygienist on the staff of the United Rubber Workers union, which has many members involved in vinyl operations at various companies: "I look at this as the dropping of a bomb. It opens up the possibility of a whole new occupational disease."

Mr. Beliczky said he suspected there might be a connection between the Goodrich problems at the Louisville plant and the problems of Borden Inc. at a vinyl-materials plant in Columbus, Ohio. Workers at the Borden plant for several months have complained of a variety of ailments, some believed crippling, which they allege are connected with working conditions.

Rudolph Kaelin, president of the Synthetic Rubber Workers unit representing the Kentucky plant's workers, said some of his coworkers "have been concerned for quite a while" about the possibility of cancer. "With these men dying of it, it makes you wonder." Mr. Kaelin says he has worked with vinyl products for about 15 years; he has been a Goodrich employee for 23 years.

A medical expert at NIOSH, however, said he doubted the difficulties at the two plants were related. He asserted that the problem at the Borden plant has been defined as peripheral neuropathy, a disease that attacks nerves that control muscles in human limbs. The liver afflictions at the Goodrich plant seem unrelated to the problem at Borden, he said.

Goodrich has four other polyvinyl chloride plants—at Avon Lake, Ohio, Pedricktown, N.J.; Long Beach, Calif., and Henry, Ill.

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