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5 Calvert City plastics workers get liver tests

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Liver biopsies were ordered on five workers at the Air Products, Inc., plant in Calvert City, Ky., because other repeated tests had failed to show whether their exposure to vinyl chloride had caused the rare liver cancer, angiosarcoma.

The significance of the hospitalizations, which climaxed a companywide medical liver-testing program, has caused disagreement between the plant management and a spokesman for the workers.

At least one of the workers may have been found free of the suspected cancer. The results of the other four men's tests are not in yet, according to J. D. Kramer, plant manager.

Kramer said the men were hospitalized after repeated tests showed their liver functions to be abnormal. The needle biopsies, or liver samplings with a large needle, were ordered because of the failure of the other tests, he said.

Exposure to vinyl chloride is believed to have caused angiosarcoma in at least seven workers at the B. F. Goodrich Chemical Co. plant here in Louisville on Bells Lane. Five of the seven have died from the cancer.

Angiosarcoma also has been identified as the cause of death of other persons who have been exposed to vinyl chloride.

Air Products purchases vinyl chloride from a Goodrich plant in Calvert City and uses it to make polyvinyl chloride, a plastic, according to Kramer.

He said all of the Air Products men tested have worked near vinyl chloride for some portions of their careers at the plant.

Kramer said the five men showed questionable results when the company began medical tests on its 300 employees.

Kramer's view of the situation conflicts in some points with that of Sanford Beck, president of Local 3727 of the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers Union.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Beck said from Paducah that 11 men were either hospitalized or slated to go into the hospital for biopsies.

Beck said the men were hospitalized because "something is wrong with their livers."

He said the company has not revealed very much about the testing program to the workers. "They have assured us that if anything is wrong they'll tell us," Beck said.

"They have found a lot of things wrong, but they won't say what it is," he said.

Kramer said, "We have told them repeatedly we don't have the results. It is a medical matter."

He said the doctor in the cases has told the workers he will send the test results to their private physicians.

Kramer said the doctor is "busy, busy" and does not have time to talk individually with each man.

Beck says he can't even get the company to give him a complete report on the results of the two tests he took.

Kramer said an undetermined number of men will be or have been retested because of the results of their initial tests. Beck says he recently took a second test.

Kramer said the full report on the testing program will be made in Washington next week at a hearing sponsored by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration on the changing of the exposure limits to vinyl chloride. The government agency is proposing a zero level of exposure. The present "emergence" level is a maximum exposure of 50 parts vinyl chloride per million parts of air, one-tenth the original standard.

Beck, who said he has worked at the plant for 15 years, said most of the men hospitalized have worked there about six years. However, one man has worked 15 years in vinyl-chloride operations, he said.

Beck said the local union has appealed to the union headquarters in Washington and to government agencies in an effort to learn more about the situation at the Calvert City plant.

"It's a pretty touchy thing with us now," he said. "If this is not a safe place to work they ought to shut it down."

Beck said some men are told their tests have come back "positive." He said, however, that many workers have not been told what "positive" means.

The government hearing in Washington begins amid new developments in the vinyl chloride situation that came to public light in January when Goodrich announced the first of its deaths.

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