

PRESSURE FOR TIGHTER CONTROL ON CHEMICALS

The unknown poison

BY DAVID BELL IN WASHINGTON

A SMALL chemical plant in a former back yard suburb has become the latest symbol of the dangers of unmonitored pollution and of the difficulties of coming to terms with the danger even once it has been discovered. In Westmore are now dismantling the \$176,000 plant in Hopewell, Virginia, which was closed by State authorities last summer, nine months after deaths were first expressed about the safety of the chemical it was producing. Twenty-nine former workers are in hospital with respiratory ailments, showed speech, loss of weight, erratic eye movements, and liver damage.

A number of doctors here said that not only do they have no idea how to get the chemical out of the bodies of the former workers, but also that their severely ill children are almost certainly seriously affected by the chemical as well. Traces of the white powdery substance, known as Kepone, have been found in the air in fivers, up to 40 miles away. One of Virginia's major rivers has been closed for most of its length to make sure that fish have not been contaminated as well.

Kepone is not unlike DDT and has been widely used in heavily diluted form as an active ingredient in bait for ants and cockroaches. Part of the production of the Hopewell plant was exported to Germany, where it was used as a pesticide on potatoes, and to Central and South America where it was used on bananas.

State investigators found a film of Kepone dust, 95 per cent pure, over all the tables in the cafeteria. Mom carried it home on their clothes, and doctors believe that it was transferred in the family wash to the clothes of their children. The chemical does not break down in the body.

It is concluded that the chemical did cause severe neurological and other damage to many workers, but so far there is no agreement as to who is to blame. The process of closing the plant is being cited by environmentalists as evidence that existing laws and monitoring procedures are not strict enough. Before the Hopewell plant was set up, Kepone was produced for twelve years by Allied Chemical which in 1974 closed production of the chemical to two former employees who set up at Hopewell and sold their entire production to Allied. Allied has repeatedly denied that it has any responsibility for conditions in

the Hopewell plant and contends that the firm it founded, the company, Life Science Products, must take the blame. An Allied spokesman said at the end of last month that the company never concealed the fact that Kepone was highly toxic and that while "very much disrespected" by the Kepone matter it was in no way legally responsible.

The former workers at Hopewell do not accept this and have filed a \$250,000 damage suit against Allied and Life Science products, charging that Allied had failed to give proper warnings of the dangers. The two owners of the Hopewell plant have so far refused to comment on their view of the matter save to reject an allegation by Allied that they were aware of the danger at Hopewell. The workers' charges that they were not encouraged to use the safety equipment provided, and that they were never told of the danger. The former plant superintendent has said that when he first began to shake uncontrollably he put it down to exhaustion after a hard day's work, never thinking that

it might be caused by the chemical. Meanwhile, a State air pollution monitoring station less than 200 yards away from the plant was recording relatively large amounts of Kepone dust in the air. These were never analysed.

Because Kepone was not classified as a notifiable pesticide under Federal regulations—ironically it is a chemical subject to further formulation in the pesticide production process—it did not fall under theegis of the environmental protection agency. It has since been registered. This when an EPA inspector visited the plant in March 1975, he did not move in and send a memo to Washington stating that Kepone was being made. Three months later the Virginia Health Department's Bureau of Hygiene became aware of the "hazardous" nature of the ingredients and products at the plant, but there was no formal procedure by which to alert the Federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration which has power to inspect plants such as that at Hopewell.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration advised

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Allied, in fact did draw attention in 1966 to the dangers of the chemical in a memorandum which reads in part: "The raw materials and desired product of this process are very toxic or reactive materials, which must be handled carefully and kept from the skin, eyes, respiratory system and mouth." An Allied spokesman has since said that one of the two men who ran the Hopewell plant was one of the greatest experts in the field of Kepone production.

Whatever the truth of allegations that one of the other of the companies involved could have paid more attention to the dangers, the length of time that it took officials to deal with the case is being widely criticised. Only eight months after the plant had begun operation, a Virginia water control board alleged that it was working the Hopewell Sewerage system, and the State agency began to discuss with Hopewell ways in which the pollution could be kept within bounds. But apparently even without whether the chemical might be

all companies which produce Kepone. Late on Wednesday night that they should limit the exposure of their employees to the pesticide. The workers were sent to hospital and the companies were also advised to expect a visit from Government inspectors to make sure that employees are being properly protected. Only when two alert doctors discovered evidence of Kepone poisoning to the body of a former Kepone worker did the State Health Department shut down the plant last July. It is now being torn down.

The lawyer defending the two owners of the plant has since claimed that "while every agency in the world has jumped on this in hindsight," none of the agencies acted with great their team. The Water Board has since said that it did not know enough about Kepone, and the Air Pollution Board was kind and or alerted the owners in that it never analysed the dust. The water control board did not know enough about Kepone. A special investigating force is now trying

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to discover what needs to be done to remove all traces of Kepone from the area.

The Hopewell Case is giving fresh impetus to attempts to get Congress to pass a new Act for the control of toxic substances, which would give the EPA far wider authority over the use of dangerous chemicals used in the making of many industrial and commercial products.

While the chemical industry agrees that there are loopholes that need closing, it argues that any stringency restrictions would place a financial burden on smaller companies that might actually benefit some of them. So far the industry has only supported bills that would allow pre-market screening of only a very small number of obviously suspicious substances.

Senator John Tunney of California, one of the main sponsors of the Senate Bill, says that "control at this stage avoids the pain misery, and in some cases death, that has so far frequently followed the production of chemicals in later quantities without sufficient knowledge as to their toxic properties."

A recent example that Mr. Tunney and others point to is that of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) widely used in electrical and other industrial products. Traces of these chemicals have been found in fish in the Great Lakes and the Hudson River. They are widely suspected of causing cancer. Mr. Russell Train, the EPA's Administrator, said at a recent Press Conference that "we find ourselves without any authority that we really need to cope with the problem." Mr. Train added: "I am troubled by the delay... we are moving into an era where action gets harder and harder."

For the Hopewell workers and their families protesting might have prevented disaster, but Kepone had been produced for a long time and might well not have come under the proposed bill any way. They would perhaps have benefited more from far closer co-operation between State and Federal agencies.

As it was, it was a fireman who put his finger on the problem. "I was walking and it hits me, it is hot, it is hurt you," he told people at the plant on seeing the white dust which had been mistaken for a cloud of smoke. He was told not to worry.

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