FILE NAME: Household Contact (HC)

DATE: 1936 Jan 22

DOC#: HC006

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Newspaper Article - Plant Closed, Mysterious Malady Hits 100

PLANT CLOSED MYSTERIOUS MALADY HITS 100

Earle Rallies State Agencies to Fight Outbreak at York Factory.

By JESSE LAVENTHOL
Record's Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG, Jan. 21.—Affliction of more than 100 employes with a mysterious skin disease, believed caused by chemicals used in the General Electric plant at York, today prompted Governor Earle to ask officials of the company to close the plant.

A few hours later B. S. Obermeir, the manager, informed the Governor's secretary, Robert L. Myers, by telephone of his compliance with the request. He said operations were suspended temporarily Friday to make changes suggested by State investigators and the plant will remain closed until ...les complete their inquiry ...fer with company officials.

Bashore Reports.

The Governor acted after Secretary of Labor and Industry Bashore reported that investigation showed the death of one employe 11 days ago may have resulted from the poisoning.

Within the past six months three workers at the plant have died, but no post-mortem examinations were made in the two earlier deaths and there is no indication whether the skin malady was a cause.

Governor Earle's appeal to the management was made by telegram after a conference with Bashore, Raymond J. Nicaise, chief of the Bureau of Industrial Standards, and Dr. William B. Fulton, in charge of the industrial hygiene laboratory.

Earle's Telegram.

It follows:

"Ralph M. Bashore, Secretary of Labor and Industry, informs me that 102 of 124 employes examined in your York plant are suffering in varying degrees from a skin condition result... from the use of chloro-...enyl and chlorinated naphthalene in your manufacturing ocess.

"One man died January 10 from yellow atrophy of the liver, suspected to have resulted from the same chemicals. Until this suspicion is confirmed or removed, I appeal to your sense of public spirit and your re... fare to shut down this plant.

"I have instructed the Department of Health and the Department of Labor and Industry to use immediately every medical resource of the Commonwealth, or of the nation, if necessary, to analyze and correct this condition. Please telegraph your decision as quickly as possible."

Office Workers Hit.

The chemicals named by the Governor are contained in a wax compound used to impregnate one of various types of insulated wire manufactured at the York plant.

In melting the wax compound vapors and fumes arise, circulating through the plant. Even office workers in the building say they have been affected.

The vapors settle on clothing, cool and harden. Families of workers to an unknown number are believed to have acquired the skin ailment, which is transmissible by contact.

Child Afflicted.

One specific instance which has come to the attention of Dr. Fulton in the course of the investigation, still under way, is that of 2-year-old Joseph Differendorfer, Jr., son of a former worker at the plant. Both the boys' parents and their 11month-old daughter also show symptoms of the infection.

The Department of Labor and Industry had no authority to go into the plant and examine the employes' physical condition. They were able to do so only after obtaining permission of the General Electric Company after a delay of more than a month following the request, Bashore said.

Governor Earle pointed out he has no authority to force the closing of the plant.

Law Need Stressed.

Bashore's report to the Governor stressed the current case, somewhat similar to the plight of silicosis victims of the "Death Tunnel," at Gauley, W. Va., as evidence of the need for strengthening Pennsylvania's compensation laws to apply to industrial diseases.

The man whose death is believed attributable to chemical poisoning was John J. Fallon, 22, a former Philadelphian. The suspicion that his death was from yellow atrophy of the liver seemingly is supported by a report to the American Public Health Association at Milwaukee on October 8. It was made by Dr. Louis Schwartz, of the U. S. Public Health Service.

Dr. Schwartz said:

"Cases of death due to yellow atrophy of the liver have been reported among workers exposed to the fumes of chloro-naphthalenes."

Conclusions Drawn.

These conclusions were reported to Governor Earle:

1. The material used at the plant here is a compound which contains chlorinated-naphthalene and chloro-diphenyl.

2. Any contact with these two substances will produce an acne-like rash.

3. That out of 124 employes in the General Electric plant at York examined, 102 are definitely affected with this skin trouble. There are 160 employes. The others have not been examined yet.

4. The affliction is transmissible to families by contact with soiled clothing.

5. It results even though the employe is not engaged directly in the work.

Charges Made.

6. The trouble appeared on the average of approximately 4.7 months after employment in the group examined.

7. At least one employe of the plant died from yellow atrophy of the liver. Dr. Schwartz, of the U. S. Department of Health, indicates that yellow atrophy of the liver may result from contact with chloro-diphenyl or chlorinated naphthalene.

8. The manufactured wire is sold to various individuals, municipalities and the United States Government. It is feared that contact with the manufactured article may produce the dermatitis found in this plant.

9. The General Electric plant already has adopted the suggestions of this department by installing a new exhaust system for the collection of the fumes at their source which would stop dissemination throughout the workroom. They also have segregated the manufacture of wire impregnated with the suspected product from the manufacture of other wire by partitioning a separate room in which this wire alone is made.

Physician Retained.

10. The company at its own suggestion has increased sanitary facilities whereby additional shower baths have been installed and the workers are compelled under supervision to take a bath before leaving the plant and to change clothing. The company also purchased new lockers and gave the workmen overalls which are laundered by the company twice a week. The company has employed a plant physician.

11. The department is continuing its intensive studies of this problem with a hope of its solution.

12. It is evident that additional authority by means of legislation should be given the department for the investigation and the correction of industrial hazards such as this.

13. It is evident by the occupational diseases resulting to the workers in this plant that a workmen's compensation act applicable to occupational diseases, such as this and others, should immediately be enacted in Pennsylvania.

Informed by Letter.

The case came to the attention of the Commonwealth October 15 through a letter signed by a "Mrs. Green," of York, who subsequently could not be identified or located.

The letter said:

"Dear Sirs:

The General Electric Company in York, Pa., are using a compound which is injuring the health and skin of the employes. You were informed about this before. Kindly do something about it."

Dr. Fulton, who is in charge of the State's laboratory engaged in study of occupational disease hazards, visited the plant three days later.

"He obtained a promise from the plant officials that at a later date we could investigate the conditions concerning the skin disease," Bashore wrote the Governor. "He made a personal inspection of the plant and observed the various operations there also, noting sanitary facilities, etc.

Permission Given.

"Promise was not given immediately because the officials desired to contact their home officials and finally on November 25 we were given definite permission to make further studies with particular reference to the physical condition of the workmen.

"The compound has been used in the manufacture of wire in this plant for a number of years in small quantities. In the last two years it has been used in greater quantities by reason of the fact that they are impregnating more wire. Since its greater use in the last two years, the dermatitis has broken out among the employes."

Fallon, who died January 10, was employed at the York plant in March, 1935. His widow told probers about three months after his employment he noticed the dermatitis. He began to feel ill in July. He was admitted to the York hospital the week of January 5.

In Doubt at First.

"The attending physician in the first two cases," said Dr. Fulton, "was in doubt about his final diagnosis, but stated he felt that the second man may have died of a similar condition to the third man.

Dr. Hugh S. Cummings, U. S. surgeon general, in a telephone conversation with Secretary Bashore tonight said he will have representatives of the U. S. Public Health Service in Harrisburg tomorrow to confer with Pennsylvania authorities.

Dr. J. Moore Campbell, Director of the Bureau of Health Conservation, has been assigned to go to York tomorrow. He will interview families of victims, check up on the number of wives and children who have been infected and instruct them in sanitation measures.

Officials will check a report that a process similar to that employed at the York plant is used by the General Electric at another plant in Bridgeport, Conn., where workers also are said to have been affected. Dr. Edith MacBride-Dexter, Secretary of Health, is communicating with Connecticut health officials to learn methods successful there.

Philadelphia Record
January 22, 1936

DIVISION OF OCCUPATIONAL HYGIENE
Mass. Dept. of Labor and Industries
33 Joy St., Boston Tel CAPitol 06X

PLAINTIFF'S EXHIBIT GE 422