

Briefed on research

Chemical firms knew of cancer link in '73

By DONALD W. HOUGHTON
and DENNIS POLITE
Louisville Times Staff Writers

Several chemical firms, including the B. F. Goodrich Co., knew of preliminary but significant data linking exposure to vinyl-chloride gas to a rare liver cancer, but the information was not made public for more than a year.

While acknowledging that the controversial scientific information hinting at a link between the chemical and cancer was discussed at a meeting of industry representatives on Jan. 30, 1973, a spokesman for the Manufacturing Chemists Association (MCA) said the European firms that provided the information insisted that it be kept confidential.

And a spokesman for Goodrich would acknowledge only that a representative of the company attended "one or more meetings" at which the scientific findings were discussed.

Earlier this month the president of the Goodrich chemical division, Anton Vitone, said the first he knew of a study establishing an apparent link between exposure to the chemical and the liver cancer, angiosarcoma was in February of this year, when an Italian who did the research testified in Washington. And Vitone said he never heard the word "angiosarcoma" until December of last year.

Death of 3 announced here

In January, Goodrich announced that three of its Louisville employees had died of angiosarcoma after years of exposure to vinyl chloride, and that some of its employees here were showing liver abnormalities on medical tests. Nearly a month later the work of the Italian researcher, Dr. Cesare Maltoni of Bologna, was reported publicly by the MCA.

However, notes of the Jan. 30, 1973, meeting show that William E. McCormick, manager of environmental controls for Goodrich, represented the chemical division at the MCA meeting.

(McCormick retired "a year to 18 months ago," according to the Goodrich spokesman. He could not be located for

comment and the Goodrich spokesman said he did not know what, if any, actions had been taken within the company as a result of any reports McCormick might have made on the confidential MCA meeting.)

The MCA spokesman said today that the Jan. 30 meeting apparently was the first at which chemical firms in this country learned of the European research into a possible liver cancer produced by exposure to vinyl chloride. He also claimed that the European research was reported as being of "high quality" and comparable to scientific research work done in American laboratories.

Asked about this point today, the public-relations spokesman for Goodrich again stressed the firm's position that in early 1973, the Maltoni research was "not complete" and the researcher's findings were "inconclusive." He said he was not aware that the president of the chemical division of his firm had said he was unaware of Maltoni's work until this year.

The public-relations man at MCA said there had been "great reluctance" by European firms to share their scientific data until they were guaranteed it would be kept in confidence.

He said the MCA committee agreed to keep the data under wraps Dec. 20 and the Jan. 30 meeting was then scheduled. The European firms were identified as Montedison, which initiated the Maltoni study; Imperial Chemical Industries; Solvay, and Rhone-Poulenc. At least one of those firms, Imperial Chemical, has since reported that at least one of its workers died of angiosarcoma.

MCA is now preparing a timetable of the sequence of events leading up to the association's final public announcement of the European research this February. It expects to issue this information later this week.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the National Industrial Institute for Occupational Safety (NIOSH) said the federal agency is still trying to determine who within

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the institute was told last summer by Dr. Maltoni of the researcher's findings.

Maltoni, who made a partial report on his findings to an international symposium on cancer detection in April last year, has declined to say whom he warned in the institute.

The NIOSH spokesman acknowledged the continuing confusion in reconstructing who told who what and when about the possible dangers of exposure to vinyl chloride. Then he added his own opinion that the Jan. 30, 1973 MCA meeting to discuss the European research raises the possibility that the chemical industry may have been looking for liver cancer

damage after that date without publicly disclosing the fact.

At Goodrich, earlier testimony by Vittone, the head of the firm's Cleveland, Ohio, based chemical division, indicates that a possible medical problem with vinyl chloride may have been suspected in 1964, when several Louisville workers began having a rare hand disease, but this was later cleared up after cleaning procedures were changed.

Then, in May 1970, Dr. V. L. Viola of Rome, Italy, began reporting tumors in rats exposed to vinyl chloride, and an industry committee put together by MCA "learned of similar animal research which had been initiated by some European . . . manufacturers some time after Dr. Viola's report," according to Vittone. This was apparently a reference to

Dr. Maltoni's work, but he was not identified by name in Vittone's testimony at a hearing in Washington this year on the vinyl-chloride problem.

Then, Vittone noted, the MCA began an animal test last September and an industrywide study in December. Goodrich itself resumed liver tests in September after its Louisville plant physician detected liver problems among workers in late spring. Those tests were completed in December and, together with the uncovering of the deaths from angiosarcoma, led to the January announcement by Goodrich that kicked off the public controversy about vinyl chloride.

Exposure to vinyl chloride, a key chemical to much of the plastics industry, has now been linked with the deaths of 13 American chemical workers and six workers overseas.

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