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Public hazard, private decisions

With scarcely any publicity in Britain, a decision has been taken in the United States which will transform the whole context of the debate about the health effects of vinyl chloride (New Scientist, vol 62, p 675 and vol 63, p 59). Last week the Occupational Health and Safety Administration decided that after the 1 January, 1975, the maximum permissible concentration of vinyl chloride monomer in any chemical plant should not exceed a time weighted average of one part per million (ppm) in any eight hour period. Excursions to a maximum of 5 ppm will be allowed for up to 15 minutes. These regulations replace the emergency OSHA standard of 50 ppm adopted earlier this year when the first inklings that vinyl chloride might be carcinogenic were abroad. Within 10 minutes of the announcement of the new standard, the US Society of Plastics Industry, Firestone, and Hooker Chemicals had filed suits in the New York City Court of Appeal, asking that it be put aside as too stringent.

The OSHA decision is the climax of a long summer of protracted public debate. Public is the key word. In July OSHA held a public hearing at which medical authorities, industrial experts and trade union leaders gave evidence and were interrogated by each other's lawyers. In August the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on the Environment also heard evidence on the vinyl chloride issue. OSHA's commissioned study of the economic impact of proposed standards, and its environmental impact statement on the physiological effects of those standards, are both public documents. This airing of the issue, together with labour criticisms that OSHA is slow and indecisive and the movement of toxic substances bills through the US legislature, has ensured wide press coverage of the scientific evidence. It also means that the trade unions involved are working in an atmosphere of free access to vital information.

It is difficult not to believe that this freedom allowed,

even encouraged, trade unions to pressurise OSHA into making a brave decision. (Which should not detract from the union's insistent advocacy of a tough standard—ideally zero exposure.) The new standard is not as clear-cut as the unions would like because it allows that in the first year of its operation workers can, at their own discretion, work without respirators in concentrations of vinyl chloride up to 25 ppm. Nevertheless OSHA has clearly chosen to weight the medical evidence, which strongly indicates that *any* exposure to vinyl chloride is dangerous, much more heavily than the economic, which shows that a limit of 15 ppm time weighted average would force 26 per cent of the US's polyvinyl chloride plants to close.

The openness of the way the US decision was reached contrasts starkly with the position in Britain. Here a working party of unions and management set up by the Department of Employment will decide what amendments need be made to the temporary limit of 50 ppm. The working party works in absolute secrecy that better suits a conclave of cardinals electing a new Pope. Even union members working in the plants concerned find it impossible to get a clear account of what is happening on a body that is discussing their future health. However, the leaks have it that the unions are asking for a 5 ppm time weighted average limit, the employers conceding no more than 25 ppm. This unseemly private haggling could be easily swept away—the newly created Health and Safety Commission should, as one of its first steps, order an immediate public inquiry on vinyl chloride. And it should insist that the inquiry has access to government and industry documents. Otherwise the suspicion that the moguls of the chemical industry have seduced union leaders into unjustifiable compromise will be impossible to refute.

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