

e Machinist
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By Sidney Margollus

One of the most disturbing aspects of the controversy over the industrial uses of vinyl chloride, a cancer-causing gas recently implicated in the deaths of several workers, is that some U.S. and European corporations and the Manufacturing Chemists Association (MCA), knew of the dangers but withheld these facts for at least a year.

This information was made public by one of the country's leading professional associations, the American Chemical Society, in the May 20 issue of its *Chemical and Engineering News*.

In August, 1972, an Italian scientist, Cesare Maltoni, found his first angiosarcoma (a rare form of cancer) in the liver of rats he was testing, the article relates. In January, 1973, a team of three U.S. chemical industry scientists visited Professor Maltoni to learn of his results.

First U.S. reports

However, U.S. chemical industry sources say they were bound by an agreement under which four European firms controlled release of the animal test data, the report reveals. The first public disclosure of the findings came on Feb. 15, 1974, in the U.S., after B. F. Goodrich's announcement of three deaths due to angiosarcoma of the liver among workers at its Louisville, Ky., plant.

Subsequently, the total number of confirmed liver angiosarcoma cases at other plants in the U.S. and abroad has risen to 19, including 13 in the U.S.

PVC risks kept quiet

Based largely on Professor Maltoni's findings, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has lowered the permissible worker exposure level of vinyl chloride to 50 parts per million from the previous ceiling of 500 ppm. But the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department has criticized this standard, and the U.S. Labor Department has proposed a complete ban on worker exposure to vinyl chloride.

Vinyl chloride also has been widely used as a propellant for many aerosol spray products used by consumers. It now has been banned for this purpose even though the risk involved in this use was said to be relatively small.

In general, despite their admitted convenience, aerosol spray products have come under increasing attack for their hazards. Vinyl chloride spray had been used in many hair sprays, some brands of medicated vaporizers, athlete's foot sprays, some antiperspirants and deodorants, wig sprays and cleaners, and even antiseptic room sprays.

Previously the Food and Drug Administration had banned aerosol spray cough remedies, usually labeled "decongestant sprays," containing trichloroethane. This solvent is an anesthetic when inhaled and disrupts normal heart beat more rapidly even than chloroform.

Another frequent problem is flammability of such sprays and, in some products, the danger of fumes. The Consumer Product Safety Commission reported the case of a woman who used a spray varnish in a small room.

While the vapors were still in the air, she lit a cigarette and was nearly consumed in flames.

Nowadays aerosol cans are labeled "flammable" and it can be argued that this woman should have known better than to light a cigarette. But Commissioner Barbara Franklin points out that while the can was labeled "flammable," the woman "had no way of knowing the vapors were also flammable."

Labels inadequate

Without doubt, aerosol hazards are multiplied by inadequate labels. None of the products I have examined say what the propellant is, for example, whether the product contains vinyl chloride. Despite the recalls, many such products may still be in consumers' homes and some may even be on store shelves.

Some cans display prominent warnings about flammability, fumes and dangers even of high heat. Others provide only obscure statements in small print sometimes buried in the instructions.

Obviously, the quickest action the government agencies can take is to require that labels state the kind of propellant and set standards for the prominence of warnings.

There are additional dangers in the use of aerosol cans to which consumers need to be alert. One is that the can will explode if dropped into a trash fire or incinerator, or if the can is punctured. Significantly, vent release devices which will reduce this danger have been available for at least four years at the cost of a couple of pennies.

But even more prominent warnings may not be enough. Some products with hidden dangers, such as the spray varnish, shouldn't be on the market at all. At least some manufacturers use alternative packages. One is pump-type hair sprays. They are probably as convenient, and may cost no more or even less since they waste less of the product. Moreover, some manufacturers, who make both kinds, say that the pump type also provides better holding power for hair than aerosol spray products.

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