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AN OH EDITORIAL

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Occupational disease sends shock waves throughout industry

ASK the average businessman for developments that send shock waves through an entire industry and chances are he'll reel off international monetary fluctuations, tumbling stock exchange prices, stockholders' suits, perhaps new pollution control legislation.

Few would mention occupational disease, but we submit that if you really want to see that seismograph's needle jump, you announce that a substance widely used in a given industry appears to have cancer-causing properties. If you're skeptical, just ask your colleagues in the asbestos, rubber, or plastic industries.

Several years ago when Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of Mt. Sinai School of Medicine disclosed the results of a study indicating that 1 in 10 asbestos workers died of asbestosis, that 2 in 10—5 times the rate of the population at large—died of lung cancer, and that 1 in 10 died of mesothelioma, a rare cancer of the pleura, the disclosure set off a chain of events that revolutionized asbestos production methods at an estimated cost to the industry, projected through 1976, of $100 million.

Little more than two years ago, B. F. Goodrich Chemical Co. disclosed that several deaths due to angiosarcoma, a rare liver cancer, had occurred among workers in their vinyl chloride operations in Louisville and asked NIOSH to investigate. After NIOSH's initial investigation, Dr. Marcus Key, then director of NIOSH, said: ". . . It would appear that a new occupational cancer has been discovered: angiosarcoma of the liver. It is associated with the polymerization of vinyl chloride in the manufacture of polyvinyl chloride. Vinyl chloride is the chief suspect among the more than 50 chemicals used in the plant." That announcement set off a chain of events that ultimately resulted in OSHA's adoption of a new standard, setting the exposure limit at 1 part per million (ppm), which took effect April 1, 1975. When NIOSH was responding to Goodrich's call, the threshold limit value for VC was 500 ppm. OSHA originally proposed a "no-detectable-level" standard which an Arthur D. Little, Inc. study undertaken for the Society of the Plastics Industry, Inc. estimated would cost industry 1.6 million jobs and $65 billion in loss of production and sales.

As this issue of OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS reveals, there's more to come. OSHA has formed a committee to prepare a draft of a proposed coke oven emissions standard (See, "The Steel Industry's Response to an Occupational Health Crisis" on page 38). Though it's far too early for precise calculation—no standard has been proposed as yet—the bill for control of coke oven emissions by the steel industry is sure to run into seven figures. In the coming months, OSHA plans to unveil proposed standards covering cotton dust, crystalline, silica, and ammonia. And you can be sure that in the future that list will continue to lengthen. Meanwhile, public hearings are to be held this month preparatory to OSHA's adoption of a new noise standard. (See OSHA Communique: A Special Report on Noise Control on page 31.)

As new health standards toil through the bureaucratic mill and then take the necessary procedural route toward formal adoption, you can be sure OSHA will be excoriated for moving too slowly or too hastily. NIOSH will be criticized for being "too ivory-tower" or sorely understaffed, and law briefs will be prepared to invalidate the new standard the moment it is officially promulgated, but OSHA-NIOSH will continue to grind those standards out.

Clearly, OSHA-NIOSH are here to stay, as are the health activists of the Ralph Nader stripe, and the medical scientists of the Dr. Selikoff stripe, both prominent in the movement to expand and intensify occupational health research. Moreover, organized labor is showing a new sophistication and an increased concern for occupational health. In the past 5 years, several unions have included joint management-labor occupational health research project provisions in labor contracts, and more unions will be following suit in the future.

In this special issue of OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS, our message is clear: Anyone who underrates the vitality of the occupational health movement or deludes himself into believing that its effects will be confined to two or three industries, does so at his own peril. What's worse, at the peril of the workers he's pledged professionally to protect. Because after all the arguments about economic feasibility and interpretation of data are in, after all the fine legal distinctions have been made, one inescapable fact remains: We're talking here about the lives and well-being of American workers. ■