Mystery Disease Arrives Quietly, Stuns Workers

Medical Detectives Hunt Toxic Culprit In Plant's Chemicals

By Don Frederick, Jr.
FROM COLUMBUS, OHIO

The print department at the [redacted] plant never has been a particularly pleasant place to work.

Employes are allowed two 10-minute breaks during their 8-hour shift for meals, smokes, and relaxation. So most workers just eat on the job.

The machines that are used to print designs on wall coverings, the company's main product, cause constant nicks and cuts on the hands. Many veteran employes can swap stories of arms trapped in the elaborate equipment. And then there are the ever-present fumes, caused by inks and solvents in the print machines.

Buddy Moore, a print-machine operator, calls the department "a glue-sniffer's paradise." But Corwin Smith, president of Local 487 of the Textile Workers Union of America, adds: "After a while you get used to the smell. You don't even notice the fumes."

Leg Braces

Smith transferred from his print-department job in April. He left just in time. During this spring and summer, an illness began to afflict the print-shop workers. By mid-September almost 50 of the 130 or so of them and at least 10 others working in nearby areas were found to have "peripheral neuropathy," a nerve illness that weakens the body's limbs. By late September about 100 workers, including 2 at a plant a few miles away, showed some form of the disease.

Further testing continues to add to the numbers found to be stricken among the plant's 950 production employes. Medical authorities here believe the disease is caused by the inhalation, ingestion, and absorption of an industrial chemical.

Most of the ill workers have mild forms of the disease. But one worker now requires leg braces to walk. Five others have been hospitalized since the spring and may have suffered permanent crippling effects. About half the plant's workers decided to stay home last week. According to Smith, "They are afraid for their safety."

Dr. John Cashman, director of the Ohio Department of Health, terms the workers' illness a "tragic example" of a larger problem. "Myriads of new chemicals are introduced in thousands of factories each year," he says. Some of them cause "continued minor insults to the body" that can eventually result in sickness or take "10 years off a normal life span."

New Procedures

Identifying the chemical at fault is "a medical detective story," according to Cashman. He says "the toxic agent could be any one of a number of chemicals or a particular combination of chemicals" and admits that gathering conclusive evidence may take months.

Meanwhile, the company, a division of Borden, Inc., has adopted new safety procedures. The print shop remains open, but most department employes, on a union suggestion, have not worked since Sept. 6. Many sit in the union hall and ponder why the danger signs went unrecognized.

It was last April that the first print-shop employe became too weak to work. He was treated for arthritis. No one at the plant suspected anything unusual, certainly not the employe, James Osborne, 43, a maintenance worker for 18 years in the department. But Osborne knew that he was run-down. So in early May he quit a second job he had held for seven years. A few days later he was talking to some friends at the plant when his legs buckled. He thought it was the result of the heat and his run-down condition.



—Don Frederick, Jr.

Bill Moore: Too weak to hunt.

Osborne's condition worsened. His feet began to drag. They felt numb. By June he could not walk up a flight of stairs. He was hospitalized and treated for arthritis. When he returned to work in July, he heard that a few other print-shop men on various shifts were ill with symptoms similar to his. This seemed only a coincidence to him.

Outwardly Serene

Osborne grew weaker, and work became harder. In August his physician sent him to specialists in neurology. Late that month he mentioned to one the similar symptoms of his fellow workers. The specialist was suspicious. She made inquiries of the state health department. By most accounts, this was the first break in the case.

For Osborne, it may have come too late. He suffers from a severe form of the nerve disease. He has not worked since Aug. 20, and his condition has not improved. The slightest misstep will cause him to collapse. He says an easy chore like changing a tire "requires every ounce of strength I have." But he remains outwardly serene. "Trust in the Lord, and everything will work out," he says.

The state health department began searching for the common denominator in the lives of the six workers who had been stricken by that time. Dr. Donald Billmaier, chief of the division of occupational health, says that medical backgrounds and possible common use of a drug or alcohol were checked. But only print-department employment was common to the men. After a few weeks of testing, almost one-third of all print-shop workers, both male and female and of all ages, were found to suffer from varying forms of peripheral neuropathy.

Most of the employes were shocked. The clues had been present for months. Many workers had complained of weakness in the limbs, and a number had been limping during July and August. But few suspected their everyday environment was the cause of their fatigue. They blamed other conditions. Marian Handel, 37, has worked in the print department almost 16 years. To better his financial position, he worked overtime as much as possible. This summer he began to tire sooner each day. In his spare time he would just "lounge around and watch TV." He thought he was overworked; he stopped requesting overtime.

Vernon Johnson, 24, also worked overtime often. He needed the money to pay for a new home and swimming pool that he purchased soon after getting married in January. The extra work didn't bother him, but during the year he began to curtail other activities. He quit his bowling league. He stopped tinkering with a 1966 Impala Super Sport in which he had $7,000 invested. Then, at a state fair in August, he suddenly had trouble walking; according to his wife, Beverly, he was "limber." But Johnson was not concerned. Over the [redacted] two years he has been on an extended [redacted] and has shed close to 100 pounds. He assumed his problems were due to the weight loss.

Charolette Goodrich, 27, is an attractive brunette who has worked near the print shop for about four months. She describes herself as "normally a very spunky person." She works the third shift, from 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. She used to do her housework after work, but in the late summer she began "falling in bed" instead. Charolette had suffered a concussion a few months ago; she blamed this for her lethargy.

Speculation Becomes Reality

Oakley Dingess, 38, began feeling weak in May. He thought he had a virus. But his difficulties increased. He couldn't lift equipment on the job. Soon, walking into the plant from the parking lot became a challenge for him. Finally, it was an effort to turn the ignition key in his car. Dingess spent much of the summer in the hospital. He knew of Osborne's similar condition, but heard it was treated as arthritis. There was no reason to suspect the print-shop chemicals. Dingess now suffers from a severe case of peripheral neuropathy. After spending a day sitting in the union hall, he will return home "and feel like I've worked a full eight-hour day."

In late August some workers took note of the spreading illness. James Sorrell, 23, and his friends joked about a "mysterious disease." Around the same time, a collection was taken to financially aid the stricken workers. Buddy Moore, 22, remembers wondering what he would do if illness forced him away from job and pay. A few weeks later this idle speculation became a reality. Both Sorrell and Moore now have a mild form of the nerve disease.

Though most employes first learned of their dangerous working conditions in early September, company officials say they conducted their own investigation in July. Joseph Recchi, director of company employe relations, says that "at that time the plant's physician was not convinced the sickness was industrially related."

Chemical Suspect

More than a month later the state health department quickly determined the nerve disease was indeed industrially related. The chemical at fault has been harder to identify. Methyl Butyl Ketone (MBK), a chemical that thins ink used for designs, was the original suspect. MBK was introduced at the Columbus plant about a year ago. It was the one variable in an otherwise constant situation. The company has now stopped using the chemical. Ironically, the chemical that MBK replaced was discarded because of its high pollution level.

But because cases of peripheral neuropathy have been discovered in workers outside the print-department area, MBK is no longer the prime suspect. Other chemicals used throughout the plant are now being examined.

While the toxic chemical is sought, Dr. Billmaier believes, the newly implemented safety procedures, such as a new ventilation system, a prohibition of eating on job sites, and the required use of respirators, will protect the worker from harmful exposure. Dr. Cashman believes that the plant was guilty of "sloppy housekeeping," but that now the factory "may be the safest place in Columbus."

Company employes are understandably leery. As evidence of the illness spreads through the plant, union officials are considering a suggestion that workers outside the print-shop area boycott their jobs. Says union-local president Smith, "Our people don't want to be guinea pigs."

On Half Pay

Print-department employes, though, admit they are in a frustrating position. Says Jerry Brooks, 41: "I don't particularly want to return to that shop, it's not 100 per cent safe yet. But I don't want to throw my 22 years of seniority down the drain either." Also, the various types of compensation that the workers collect when off the job amount to about half their normal wages.

For most of the stricken workers, a decision about returning to their jobs is not of immediate importance. The only therapy for peripheral neuropathy is rest; at least a few months for those with mild nerve damage, perhaps as long as four years for more severe cases. If the mysterious toxic chemical has destroyed any nerves, a possibility for a few of the men, then disability in the limbs will be permanent.

While they rest, the men and women must deal with problems created by the illness. Vernon Johnson may have to give up his new home and swimming pool; the money from workmen's compensation will not meet the payments. He and his wife had planned to adopt a child. That dream is now postponed. He must also adjust to his weakened state. Recently, his 18-year-old cousin had to open a twist-off bottle top for him.

Fear of Boating

Bill Moore, 40, will have to forgo the outdoor life. He doubts that he's strong enough to do much hunting this fall. He's also afraid to go boating in his cabin cruiser. "If she flips over, there's no way I could make it back to shore," he says.

But the major problems will be psychological. Oakley Dingess says it's "nerve-racking" just thinking about the nerve disease. And all the ill workers speak of the "helplessness" of their condition, suffering from a disease of unknown origin and length that no medication can cure.

Dr. Cashman hopes that the plight of these workers will prod other factories in Ohio to improve their safety techniques and monitor industrial chemicals more carefully. "An industrial state lives on an earthquake fault," he says. For the workers at the Columbus Coated Fabrics plant, that ground is very shaky at the moment.

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