

Chemical Firms Move to Protect Women From Substances That May Harm Fetuses

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NEW YORK—Chemical companies are starting to make practical or policy moves to make sure women of childbearing age aren't exposed to toxic substances that could harm a fetus.

American Cyanamid Co. already has begun implementation of a policy set in September for some 10 U.S. plants. It states that "women of childbearing potential shall not be assigned or allowed to bid on any job that involves exposure" to certain toxic substances, explained Dr. John Tobin, Cyanamid's associate medical director. "Women have six months to bid through normal job-selection procedure on to other jobs. At six months they will be involuntarily assigned," if they don't bid.

American Cyanamid estimated that its work force at these plants totals about 41,000 workers, including about 400 women. The policy will be implemented on a plant-by-plant basis as it becomes feasible, so that the six-month timetable varies according to location, the company said.

Although there aren't any federal health regulations regarding the fetus in the work place, federal agencies have determined safe levels of exposure for workers generally for a number of the substances on American Cyanamid's list. Some of the substances are lead and mercury and their compounds; benzene; vinyl chloride; acrylamide; carbon disulfide; carbon monoxide; carbon tetrachloride; dimethyl sulfate; cyanide and others.

"It's an idea whose time has come," said Dr. Tobin, "because this isn't handled under federal regulation . . . the fetus isn't recognized as an entity."

Complaint to OSHA

The company's policy was the cause of a complaint to the federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration by a United Steelworkers Union unit representing 13 women at Cyanamid's Linden, N.J., plant. The workers were told of the policy Oct. 18. The union subsequently requested OSHA to test the plant's air for acrylamide contamination.

Richard Palmieri, OSHA's area office director, said the company had refused to give information to employees on levels of acrylamide contamination at the plant.

"The issue is why the company is listing this chemical when OSHA has no evidence of related fetus problems," Mr. Palmieri said. "It's an emotionally charged issue. We and the union are afraid it might (the policy) be a trial balloon for getting rid of women in chemical plants by the arbitrary decision of any company. However, we haven't seen the written corporate policy about job reassignment yet."

"We're afraid that many female employees without seniority to bid on jobs, because of the union job structure, won't be able to be reassigned," he added. "As far as acrylamide goes, we know from previous visits that the old facility exceeds acceptable air levels. However, protective equipment is being used by workers while the company is in the process of building a new facility that will rectify the situation." The plant employs about 950 workers.

An American Cyanamid spokesman said "the action is being taken as a sincere effort to protect employee health" and therefore shouldn't be considered discriminatory.

"Every effort will be taken to reassign the women," Dr. Tobin said. "There is usually a 5% to 8% turnover of the work force in any six-month period, so we hope there will be enough job openings. We hope we can overcome the economic factors involved."

Dow Chemical

Dow Chemical Co. said it's in the process of drawing up a policy regarding temporarily unsafe exposure for women of childbearing age, although "we think our plants are safe for everyone," said a spokesman. A list of less than 10 chemicals has been drawn up that Dow found to be through literature search known to effect the fetus.

"We cannot rule out the possibility that an unsafe exposure might be found in the future," he said. As the policy recommendation to management now stands, "women will be asked to temporarily leave a work area with equal pay and no loss of seniority when safe exposures can't be assured," the spokesman said. "It's under management consideration now."

The Dow spokesman emphasized that the company wants to reserve the right in any potential hazardous cases to take precautions to protect working women's health.

Several other chemical companies reportedly are working on similar health policies, including Union Carbide Corp., Eastman Kodak Co.'s chemical unit, Du Pont Co., and Celanese Corp. However, company spokesmen said that to their knowledge, their managements weren't working on any policy designed specifically to protect the fetus or potential childbearing women in their plants.