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Avon Lake birth defect rate mystifies medic

By MONICA WILLIAMS

Avon Lake and two other northern Ohio communities have higher than average rates of birth defects, according to a spokesman for the Ohio Department of Health. But it has not yet been determined what causes the defects.

Dr. Peter Infante, of the department's division of chronic diseases, said no link has been established, for the present, between the higher than average defect rates in Avon Lake, Painesville and Ashtabula and the fact that all three communities have plants which use vinyl chloride.

PRELIMINARY FIGURES researched at the request several weeks ago of the AFL-CIO showed that in Avon Lake, there were 22 malformations out of every 1,000 live births. In Painesville, the figure was 20 per 1,000 and in Ashtabula it 18 per 1,000. The state-wide average was 11.4.

In Lorain County, the rate was 11.6 during 1972, the most recent year for which figures

were available locally. The figure was 15.4 in Cuyahoga County that year.

The percentage of stillbirths and infant mortality was no higher in the communities with vinyl chloride manufacture than in other communities, Infante noted.

THE CHEMICAL has been under attack by the union as a possible cause of liver cancer. The industrial union department of the AFL-CIO recently told a congressional committee excessive birth defects might be related to plant use of vinyl chloride.

B.F. Goodrich, which uses vinyl chloride as a raw material in the manufacture of polyvinyl chloride at its Avon Lake plant, is "checking out" the preliminary reports, a spokesman said. Vinyl chloride is also used at Robintech Inc. and Uniroyal Inc., in Painesville, and General Tire & Rubber in Ashtabula.

The health department has not contacted any industries in the three communities be-

cause there is no evidence that they may be involved, Infante said.

THE DEPARTMENT is planning a complete investigation to determine what kind of malformations are involved, who the parents are, and the rates of malformations in other industrial cities, Infante said.

"It's a very complex issue," he said. "There are a myriad of factors related to malformations. Those three cities aren't the only ones in Ohio with malformations."

A STATEMENT released this morning by B.F. Goodrich said, "There is no medical or scientific evidence establishing a relationship between vinyl chloride and birth defects."

Government medical officials are "highly skeptical of the scientific validity" of the AFL-CIO charges, the statement said.

B.F. Goodrich will continue to cooperate in studies of possible dangers of vinyl chloride exposure, the statement said.

"We just don't know what they (the defects) are related to," said Infante. "It will take a long and complex investigation and a lot of time before we might know."

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AFL-CIO would accept Toxic Substances Act

By DENNIS POLITE
Louisville Times Staff Writer

The passage of the proposed Toxic Substances Act is so urgent, the AFL-CIO says, that it is willing to accept a version of the bill about which it has many reservations.

The union makes its position known in a letter to U.S. Rep. Harley O. Staggers, D-W. Va., chairman of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce and of a joint House-Senate conference committee that is holding closed hearings on the proposed act.

"We have many reservations about both versions of the (proposed act)," the letter says. "But we will come to you with suggested amendments in the next Congress rather than delay further the passage of this vital legislation."

Basically, the act would set up screening procedures through which substances or chemical agents must go before being allowed into the environment.

Sheldon Samuels, health director for the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department, says the bill was passed in different versions by the House and Senate about a year ago. The conference committee began meeting Monday, Samuels said.

The letter was sent last Friday and signed by Peter Bommarito, chairman of the Industrial Union Department's committee on the health and safety of workers. He also is president of the United Rubber, Cork, Linoleum and Plastic Workers of America. A copy of the letter was sent to The Times.

The proposed act also would set up screening procedures for substances that have not been screened. Samuels said the bill is the keystone to the whole range of environmental legislation that has been passed by Congress. He said everything is covered except screening of substances.

Samuels said one of the main concerns of the AFL-CIO is that the bill provides too much responsibility to the Environmental Protection Agency and not enough to those in the Health, Education and Welfare Department.

The letter to Staggers cites vinyl chloride as an example of why the bill is needed, and what can happen when a chemical is allowed into the environment untested for effect on humans.

"The vinyl chloride episode is not unique . . . this tragedy serves as a good illustration of the roots of our deep-seated anxieties," the letter says.

Meanwhile, in Cleveland, a former supermarket meat wrapper has filed a suit against Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. and Borden, Inc., charging that workers have sustained respiratory, skeletal and cardiac injuries as a result of being exposed to vinyl-chloride fumes while packaging meat in polyvinyl chloride (plastic) wrappers.

The suit, on behalf of at least 284 meat wrappers at 71 Cleveland-area Pick-n-Pay supermarkets, asks \$284 million in damages. The suit contends that the wrappers were exposed to dangerous fumes as the polyvinyl chloride broke down under a

heated wire used to cut the plastic material.

A spokesman for Goodyear said the firm was "prepared to vigorously defend suits of this type." A Borden spokesman declined comment.

(Vinyl chloride is a chemical gas used as a major ingredient for plastics and also as a propellant. Since the B. F. Goodrich Chemical Co. announced in January that it suspected exposure of some of its workers to the chemical was the cause for their development of a rare liver cancer, more deaths have been found due to the cancer, angiosarcoma.

(About 26 deaths have been uncovered worldwide. At the Louisville Goodrich plant on Bells Lane there have been six deaths of workers linked to the cancer. Two other workers, both still living, also have been diagnosed as having the cancer.

(In addition, the company has furnished other workers with liver ailments to keep them away from the chemical until the full range of its effects are known.)

The letter to Staggers says more information of the effects of vinyl chloride are being developed. It cited these instances:

✓ Earlier this month, Dr. Irving Selikoff, of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, reported data that may suggest a higher-than-normal rate of stillbirths and miscarriages among the wives of workers exposed to vinyl chloride.

✓ The National Institute for Environmental Sciences will soon publish data that "conclusively establishes vinyl chloride as a mutagen (that is, capable of causing change in genetic structure).

The most detailed example quoted in the letter deals with some raw data from a study requested by the AFL-CIO from the Ohio Department of Health.

The union asked the Ohio department to determine the rates of fetal mortality and of malformations at birth in cities with substantial numbers of workers involved in vinyl-chloride or polyvinyl-chloride production.

There was no strong evidence of fetal mortality in the three cities where plants are located, the study shows.

The letter says Dr. Peter Infante, an epidemiologist with the Ohio department, reported the results.

He reportedly found that on the statewide average, about 11.4 of every 1,000 live births in Ohio were malformed, between 1970 and 1973.

But in Avon Lake, where Goodrich has a facility producing vinyl chloride, the rate for the same years was nearly 22 per 1,000 live births. Two other cities — Ash-tabula and Painesville — had rates of 18 and 20, the letter says. Both have vinyl chloride plants.

Dr. Infante said by phone from Columbus, Ohio, yesterday that his data is drawn only from three cities he studied. He said there is no indication of a link between the malformed births and the vinyl chloride.



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