

Vinyl chloride link with 9 deaths hinted

BY MIKE SNYDER
Chronicle Staff

There is "certainly the suggestion of a relationship" between vinyl chloride processed at Union Carbide's Texas City plant and the deaths of nine company employees from brain tumors, the plant manager said today.

Vinyl chloride is a substance believed to cause cancer.

"Medical research is such a complex undertaking that I've learned not to judge prematurely whether such an observation (of a link between the chemical and the deaths) would hold up," Damon Engle said.

He said federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration officials, now studying plant records, first suggested the link about a month ago. Asked if the OSHA study was prompted by an employee complaint, he said, "We believe that to be the case."

Engle said he would withhold a final judgment on a potential danger posed by vinyl chloride until the "incidents under investigation are evaluated with respect to all other causes of death among workers."

Engle said that over the past 38 years, about 450 workers out of 8,000 to 10,000 employed at the Texas City plant have died.

He said 10 of the deaths have been attributed to brain tumors, and "we suspect" nine are linked to a specific cancerous tumor known as glioblastoma multiform, which federal health authorities reportedly have linked to the vinyl chloride.

"I must point out," he added, "that should the vinyl chloride relationship hold up, OSHA as well as the industry should take credit" for recognizing it and for establishing and observing control standards for workers exposed to the chemical.

These controls, he said, include monitoring devices that measure the amount of the chemical to which workers have been exposed and regular medical tests.

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Engle said about 50 of Union Carbide's approximately 2,000 workers at Texas City work under these controls.

To "the best of my knowledge," he said, these safeguards are adequate.

The plant manufactured vinyl chloride, used in the manufacture of plastic products, from 1948 to 1970, and has processed it since then, he said.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a Cincinnati, Ohio-based federal research organization, is cooperating with OSHA in the probe at the Texas City plant, he said.

Union Carbide officials "are ensuring that some of the scientific studies by OSHA, NIOSH and ourselves will be sufficient to satisfy them and ourselves and to reassure our employees and the public," Engle said.

In 1974, vinyl chloride was found to be the cause of a rare liver cancer in some chemical plant workers. It also has been tentatively linked to other cancers, birth defects and chromosome damage.