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NIOSH Man Scores VCM Exposure Standard

A sharp disagreement apparently exists among the top scientists in the government over whether threshold levels of safety exist for chemical carcinogens and vinyl chloride monomer in particular.

This was indicated in a *New York Times* article last week on a letter Dr. Herbert E. Stockinger, chief of the Toxicology Branch of the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health, sent to Dr. Marcus M. Key, former director of NIOSH.

Dr. Stockinger was quoted as describing the VCM standard which calls for virtually no worker exposure to the chemical as "irrational" and characterizing the scientists

of the National Cancer Institute as a "lot of old fogies."

Dr. Stockinger, who is also chairman of the Committee on Threshold Limits of the American Conference of Governmental Hygienists which has dominated health standards making here and abroad for years, was critical of Dr. Key's apparent support of the VCM standard.

The article quoted Dr. Stockinger as saying in his letter:

"I was consternated, as were members of my threshold limits committee, when we noted your name associated with the essentially zero tolerance for exposure to vinyl chloride.

"In making the irrational decision, it is

clear to us that you have fallen into the fallacious trap of believing that because a substance produces dire consequences at massive concentrations (and in this case probably aided by promoters), such consequences will result from exposure at all concentrations. Wrong!"

The article then quoted an interview the *Times* reporter had with Dr. Stockinger on the letter in which Dr. Stockinger stood by his criticism of the VCM standard which he said was made for "political and other reasons."

He was quoted as saying that the decision was "unfortunate" and that there was "ample and increasing evidence that there

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are threshold levels for carcinogens below which there is little risk."

When asked about a statement of Dr. Frank J. Rausher, director of the National Cancer Program of the National Cancer Institute that the safety of vinyl chloride has not been demonstrated at any level; there is no practical scientific method to prove experimentally the safety of any level of exposure to a carcinogen, Dr. Stockinger was quoted as replying:

"Oh, there are a lot of old fogies over there at the National Cancer Institute."

The issue of the legality of the VCM standard is presently being challenged in the US Supreme Court on an appeal by Firestone Tire & Rubber Company and Society of the Plastics Industry from a decision of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals that upheld the standard.

The Supreme Court is expected to decide shortly whether it will accept the appeal. Last fortnight it turned down a request that it stay the effectiveness of the standard while it considered the appeal. The standard became effective April 1.

The National Association of Manufacturers has also joined in the suit, announcing last week that it has filed a brief as amicus curiae, asking the court to grant certiorari and hear the case.

It was argued that Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) failed to consider economic and technological feasibility factors in promulgating the standard. NAM said that this is contrary to the provisions of the Occupational Safety & Health Act.

NAM said that if the safety standard, established at 1 part per million, is allowed to stand it would mean that all of the industry "would be in danger of closing due to the fact that it is not now technically feasible to achieve a 1 ppm exposure level."

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OFFICIAL ASSAILS CANCER INSTITUTE

Scientist Calls Strong Curbs
on Exposure to Vinyl
Chloride 'Irrational'

By DAVID BURNHAM
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 6—A key Federal official has denounced the scientists of the National Cancer Institute as "a lot of old fogies" and has described as "an irrational decision" a Government requirement that workers be exposed to virtually no vinyl chloride.

The criticism was voiced by Dr. Herbert E. Stockinger, who occupies prominent positions in both the Federal agency now responsible for establishing industrial exposure levels and the professional association that has recommended these standards for many years.

The position of the cancer institute and other Federal agencies is that exposure to even the smallest amounts of vinyl chloride—the chemical base of a widely used plastic—should be avoided by workers because it has been shown to cause cancer at very low levels of exposure and because its safety has not been demonstrated at any level.

Dr. Stockinger is chief of the toxicology branch of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the Federal agency established last year to develop industrial exposure levels. He is also chairman of the committee on threshold limits of the American Conference of Governmental Hygienists, an organization whose recommended standards have dominated health practice in the United States and scores of other countries for many years.

Criticized Institute

The official criticized the cancer institute during a telephone interview when asked about a letter in which he said the Government's vinyl chloride requirement was wrong.

The letter, a copy of which has been obtained by The New York Times, was addressed to Dr. Marcus M. Key, the recently retired director of the Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and Dr. Stockinger's superior.

"I was consternated, as were members of my threshold limits committee, when we noted your name associated with an essentially pure tolerance for exposure to vinyl chloride," Dr. Stockinger's letter began.

"In making the irrational decision it is clear to us that you have fallen into the fallacious trap of believing that because the substance produces dire consequences at massive concentrations (and in this case probably aided by promoters), such consequences will result from exposure at all concentrations. Wrong!"

In the interview last week, Dr. Stockinger stood by his criticism of the Government's position on vinyl chloride, which he charged had been made for "political and other reasons."

He said that the decision was "unfortunate" and that there was "ample and increasing evidence that there are threshold levels for carcinogens below which there is little risk."

Carcinogenic Risk

Dr. Stockinger then was asked about the standards of Dr. Frank J. Rauscher, director of the National Cancer Institute, of the cancer institute, that repeated exposures to 100 parts per million of vinyl chloride should be regarded as a carcinogenic risk.

"The safety of vinyl chloride has not been demonstrated at any level; there is no practical scientific method to prove experimentally the safety at any level of exposure to a carcinogen," Dr. Rauscher said.

"Oh, there are a lot of fogies over there at the National Cancer Institute," Dr. Stockinger replied.

Dr. Key, who received Dr. Stockinger's letter, now is a professor of occupational medicine at the University of Texas School of Public Health in Houston.

Asked about the letter, Key said that though he had the "utmost respect" for Stockinger, he thought it just a drop.

The threshold limits committee that Dr. Stockinger heads has recommended exposure levels for more than 300 individual chemicals for families of chemicals since it was formed in the late 1960s. These standards were accepted as a package by the Federal Government in 1971 under the law creating the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, pending the slow process of a complete review.

U.S.S.R. an Exception

The standards of Dr. Stockinger's committee also form the basis for the exposure levels permitted in almost all other countries of the world except the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist countries.

In another Government health development the institute for occupational health has begun proceedings to discharge one of its scientists after he accused the institute of needlessly exposing American workers to the risk of cancer.

The allegation was made a little more than two months ago by Dr. Stanley C. Mazurek, in an affidavit filed in Federal court.