

Goodrich to Probe Possible Link Between Rubber-Making, Leukemia

By Dan M. Linn

The U.F. Goodrich Co. announced yesterday that it would investigate a possible link between synthetic rubber manufacturing and leukemia after finding that the employees of its Texas plant had contracted the disease since 1966.

At the same time, doctors at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health said that private research already was under way to determine the effect of chemicals used in rubber manufacturing.

Drs. Joseph Wagner and Robert Kraft of NIOSH's Division of Surveillance in Cincinnati said in a telephone interview that further study was "very much in order" and "deserved immediate attention" after the Goodrich findings.

They said that the existence of a cancer hazard in the multibillion dollar synthetic rubber industry would have broad economic impact.

The leukemia cases turned up at the Goodrich Fort Neches plant, which makes synthetic rubber for tires and conveyor belts in a process involving the chemical substances styrene and butadiene.

Dr. M. L. Johnson, the company's director of environmental health, said that a 50-year-old man employed at the plant died in February and another worker who became ill with leukemia recently is receiving treatment.

Two retired employees, 55 and 64, died of the disease since 1971 and a man who had left the plant for another job died in 1966.

Cleveland Lane, manager of public affairs and communications, said that the company planned to launch a "complete epidemiological study" to determine if there was a link and what circumstances were responsible.

There are 450 production workers at the Fort Neches

plant. NIOSH officials said that total number of employees, the number of leukemia cases turned up were "potentially significant."

But they said that more information was needed about job turnover, age, general health of workers and family members to determine if the findings were just the tip of an iceberg.

The discovery of the leukemia cases came as a result of an exhaustive study of employee health records over vinyl chloride in manufacturing by Goodrich and other companies was linked to a rare liver cancer.

Vinyl chloride is not involved in Goodrich's Texas operations.

NIOSH officials said that the industry and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union were sponsoring research on the health impact of styrenes by Harvard and North Carolina Universities.

Employees and unions at the Texas plant were informed yesterday of the leukemia findings, and NIOSH also was informed.

Dr. Anthony J. McMichael, of the Department of Epidemiology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, said yesterday that there had been a "fairly consistent excess of leukemia deaths" at synthetic rubber company plants studied during the research project.

He said that the number of deaths had varied, but that the death rate for lymphatic leukemia, a particular

type of the disease, was higher than for other types.

Lymphatic leukemia, a cancer of white blood cells that chiefly occurs late in life, after the age of 40.

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Correction

A Washington Post article stated incorrectly Sunday

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