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# Did Industry Cry Wolf?

By STEVEN RATTNER

## Polyvinyl Chloride Health Rules Can Be Met

Late in 1974, a trade association representing nearly all of the chemical manufacturers using vinyl chloride gas, a proven cause of cancer, marched into Federal court in an attempt to overturn strict Labor Department Health standards about to go into effect.

"The standard," the companies said in their court papers, "is simply beyond the compliance capabilities of the industry." They offered dire warnings of plant closings, job losses, price increases and massive economic dislocation. After all, polyvinyl chloride, vinyl chloride's principal derivative, is a $1 billion industry turning out goods ranging from plastic water pipe to bologna packaging.

The legal appeals proved futile; industry was forced to comply. But one year later, not one of the doomsday predictions has proved accurate.

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All the producers are operating within the strict Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards. The price of polyvinyl chloride has been running about 10 percent below 1974 highs and supplies are plentiful. And although one small plant is closing its doors, four new ones are coming on stream.

The success of the companies in meeting Government standards denounced only a short time earlier as unworkable has led to renewed questioning, particularly in Government circles, of industry's credibility.

"It's hard to say whether they were crying wolf," says R. M. Kossoff, a plastics consultant. "The acid test is that in a short period of time, they have proved that they can lick the problem."

Industry executives say now that they opposed the health standards because they thought they were unnecessarily strict and they weren't certain they could meet them. "We were frankly surprised by some of the results" of the cleanup effort, acknowledged R. N. Wheeler, Jr., a vinyl technical superintendent of Union Carbide Corporation.

That's not all Nick said, but the rest wasn't quoted. He told them no one could meet the letter of the law.

Vinyl chloride first became an issue in January, 1974 when the B. F. Goodrich Chemical Company, a subsidiary of the big tire maker and the largest of the polyvinyl chloride producers, announced that it had discovered that the 1968 death of an employee was due to angiosarcoma, a very rare cancer of the liver.

Similar discoveries followed, with 17 deaths in all of the industry, and health enforcement officials moved in.

OSHA initially settled on a vinyl chloride concentration limit of 50 parts per million in plant atmospheres which the industry considered fair. In fact, because of earlier indications that vinyl chloride could cause less serious ailments, nearly

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