

Goodrich's warning could save lives

MEDICAL EXPERTS at the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) are running computer checks of medical records and autopsy reports from a number of vinyl chloride plants across the U. S.

Spurring the investigations was a report in January that since 1971 three employees of B. F. Goodrich Co.'s polyvinyl chloride plant in Louisville have died of angiosarcoma of the liver.

Angiosarcoma, Goodrich doctors explain, is a fairly rare form of cancer. And a determination that the Goodrich illnesses were indeed caused by the work environment would no doubt lead to a revision of federal standards for working with vinyl chlorides.

Who told?—Although the last employee died in December, Goodrich did not receive an autopsy report until mid-January. And although all five of the firm's vinyl chloride plants were operating well below levels prescribed by the government—the Louisville plant at only 10% of those levels—Dr. Maurice N. Johnson, Goodrich's director of environmental health, said

awareness that this was the third death of its kind "warranted a thorough investigation. . . ."

Goodrich, under the law, was duty-bound to notify Kentucky health officials. But the firm was not required to notify NIOSH or to release notice of the deaths to the press.

And the fact that they did is somewhat unusual. NIOSH information officer Dick Wilson says the voluntary report was "unique."

"In our experience—and this dates back to June 1971, when the institute was first set up—this is the first voluntary alert we've received."

Because the petrochemical industry has been with us for about 20 years—and the three who died worked around vinyl chloride an average of 20 years—Mr. Wilson is concerned that the industry might soon see more such cases.

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The Goodrich report "gives us a head start on finding if there is work-relatedness in these deaths, and in finding suitable standards if there is."

Operation candor—"We were required by law to notify Kentucky officials," says John Bell, Goodrich's director of external communications and public affairs. "But those reports are privileged. Not a matter of public record."

"So our decision to notify NIOSH and to make a public announcement was based not on legal considerations but on practical matters."

"The evidence was complex, fragmentary, and inconclusive. Nonetheless, we wanted to tell our employees what is going on and not make them rely on hearing everything second-hand, or getting fragmentary information from unreliable sources," he says. □

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