News analysis

Chemical peril growing in U.S. at alarming rate

By VICTOR COHN
Globe-Democrat-Washington-Post News Service

WASHINGTON — Americans have surrounded themselves with chemicals that may endanger their lives.

Arsenic, cadmium, DDT, PCB, nitrosamines, hexachlorophene, pentachlorophenol, plasticizers, mercury, selenium. The list is growing, and the peril almost certainly is growing, too — overshadowing the environmental danger of an Alaska pipeline or the SST.

This has been given alarming emphasis in the last month at two meetings of scientists.

The subject, and what critics call "the government's inadequate response," are about to be investigated by a government operations subcommittee headed by Sen. Abraham Ribicoff (Dem.), Connecticut. Its hearings start Tuesday.

A draft of a proposed administration "toxic substance act" is called a "a small step forward, but far too weak, giving the illusion of progress" by one of the subcommittee's scheduled witnesses, Dr. Samuel S. Epstein.

BUT ENVIRONMENTAL Protection Agency director William D. Ruckelshaus, who sent the act to Congress, promises "to test in advance, so far as we are able, every new compound or element or technological innovation."

He pledges to determine every new chemical's effect "on human health and the environment" before it can be introduced.

Epstein, the doubter, spoke in an interview at a meeting of the Environmental Mutagen Society in Washington. Director of environmental laboratories at Boston's Children's Cancer Research Foundation, he helped organize that society two years ago. It includes many leading toxicologists and geneticists.

Both at its meeting and in Los Angeles, at the most environmentally oriented meeting ever held of the 110,000-member American Chemical Society there was item after item of bad news about chemicals.

These included:

DDT has apparently caused genetic changes in chromosomes of wild fruit flies throughout the West. Prof. Theodosius Dobzhansky of Rockefeller University observed the chromosome changes. Dr. Lawrence Cory and others at California's St. Mary's College have correlated them with DDT spraying patterns over the years. Cory called this dangerous tinkering with life-support systems.

PCB, AN INDUSTRIAL plasticizer and insecticide ingredient has appeared in human fatty tissue. So has pentachlorophenol, a common wood preservative. PCB's levels are higher in human fat than DDT's.

An American Chemical Society meeting in Baltimore heard that Phehalates also used in plastics are contaminating medical blood. They are used in blood storage bags (from which they migrate) in tubing for intravenous feeding and fluids and in much of the country's vast supply of food wrappings and containers.

Hexachlorophene — a powerful bacteria-killer in many soaps, antiacne products and surgeons' handcleaners — is present in its users' blood streams. It is toxic to rats. In an alarming Texas episode, it is was preceded convulsions in six children treated for burns. It is also used in hospitals and by many new mothers to wash their babies.

Large amounts of selenium, called "more toxic than mercury," have appeared in zooplankton (microscopic animal life) in Lake Michigan, downwind from Chicago. It probably comes from burning coal and oil, which release it to the atmosphere.

So go some of the gloomy reports from the world of chemistry.

FYI--
[redacted]
Bergen
Wheeler

EV John

MONS 033649