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Death of 2 Polyvinyl Chloride Workers From Rare Type of Cancer Is Verified

By BARRY KRAMER

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A second death from angiosarcoma of the liver, a rare form of cancer previously linked to vinyl chloride occupational exposure, has been discovered in the polyvinyl chloride plastic fabricating industry, the Connecticut Health Department announced in Hartford.

The two deaths increase concern that the occupational danger of cancer from vinyl chloride, a gas used to make polyvinyl chloride plastic, may be more widespread than had been thought. Since January, 13 cases of liver angiosarcoma have been detected among vinyl chloride workers from plants that manufactured the gas or that polymerized the gas into the plastic. Six other cases have been reported abroad.

But the Connecticut cases are the first known in the polyvinyl chloride fabricating industry, which turns the plastic into a myriad of finished products ranging from furniture to coated fabric to electric cable covering. German scientists recently reported finding "precursors" of angiosarcoma in the livers of six workers in a plant that turned polyvinyl chloride plastic into floor tiles.

But the Connecticut cases, confirmed as angiosarcoma by the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md., are the first actual cases. In the U.S. an estimated 6,500 persons work in the vinyl chloride industry, while the number working in the polyvinyl chloride industry numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

The Connecticut Health Department announced the first case last week, and General Electric Co. disclosed that it was a 60-year-old employee who for 30 years had operated machines at a Bridgeport cable manufacturing plant that processed various plastics, including polyvinyl chloride. The man died last July, GE said.

The second case involved a man who worked as an accountant in a polyvinyl chloride fabricating plant in the same part of the state. A health department spokes-

man declined to identify the factory involved, and a Labor Department spokesman in Washington identified it only as a Stratford plant that makes polyvinyl-coated fabrics. A further investigation is being undertaken to learn if the accountant ever worked on the production line.

Although a definite relationship between occupational exposure and angiosarcoma in the two polyvinyl chloride workers cannot be made, the Labor Department spokesman said contact with all other chemicals, drugs and diseases that can effect the liver had been ruled out in the two cases, leaving only polyvinyl chloride as a known possibility.

Connecticut's cancer registry, which uncovered the two cases and which is one of the oldest and most accurate in the nation, lists six confirmed cases of angiosarcoma of the liver since the registry was begun in 1935. The other four cases didn't have known exposure to either vinyl chloride or polyvinyl chloride, according to Dr. Barbara Christine, chief of the health department's chronic disease section. She said the link between polyvinyl chloride and the two angiosarcoma deaths "might just be chance."

The link between vinyl chloride gas and liver angiosarcoma is strong, and scientists believe that if a link is determined between exposure to polyvinyl chloride plastic and the rare cancer it will be because the plastic contains pockets of unpolymerized vinyl chloride monomer that are liberated in heating the plastic when it is fabricated into different products.

Labor Department hearings designed to set permanent standards for vinyl chloride atmospheric concentrations in factories are scheduled to begin June 25 in Washington. A temporary ceiling of 50 parts vinyl chloride per million parts of air is currently in effect and the Labor Department has proposed a limit at levels too small to be detected, a requirement the industry has said would be impossible to meet.

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