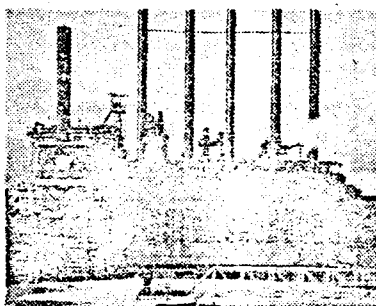


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Detecting an occupational disease

As officials of the B. F. Goodrich Co. plant in Louisville have said repeatedly, it is easy to point out, in hindsight, the failure of the chemical industry to fully recognize the danger of exposing workers to large amounts of vinyl chloride gas. The record of the past should be examined carefully, however. For the lesson to be learned from the discovery of a probable link between vinyl chloride and several diseases, including a rare and deadly liver cancer known as angiosarcoma, is that industrial managers and labor union leaders have a responsibility to be much more alert to the early warning signals of occupational health hazards.

Five former Goodrich workers are known to have died of angiosarcoma since 1964 and a sixth is ill with the disease. Blood tests have indicated that a number of employees may have liver problems. So far there is no proof that vinyl chloride is the culprit, but there is no lack of grounds for suspicion. Could it have been a mere coincidence that angiosarcoma, which ordinarily kills only about 20 Americans every year, claimed so many victims in a very small group of Louisvillians? The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration apparently doesn't think so. It has classified angiosarcoma as a new occupational disease, and is considering adding vinyl chloride to its list of cancer-causing agents, as Kentucky's occupational health agency has already done.



It is true that a company doctor did report back in the spring of 1973 that there appeared to be a high incidence of liver disorders in the Goodrich work force. After the discovery of three angiosarcoma deaths, the company did, as it is required to do by law, inform federal and state occupational health and safety agencies of its suspicions. Since then Goodrich and other firms have begun searching their employees' medical records for evidence that might shed additional light on the link between vinyl chloride and various health problems. The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health has begun its own investigations.

But why did it take the industry, and the company, so long to recognize the danger signals? Dr. Irving Selikoff of Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York, the man whose research helped prove that asbestos is a leading industrial cause of cancer, has testified

that there were indications of vinyl chloride's toxicity at least 25 years ago. Workmen's compensation records show that liver disorders came to light at the Goodrich plant about 10 years ago. Company employees claim that workers have passed out or vomited while cleaning the vats in which vinyl chloride is combined with other chemicals to make polyvinyl chloride. Stomach problems, according to other reports, were common at one time. In the mid-1960s, workers at Goodrich and at plants in Europe contracted a 'strange bone disease. Three years ago, an Italian researcher produced a cancer in rats by exposing them to vinyl chloride.

Taken singly, any one of these occurrences might have been overlooked. In combination, they should have alerted the chemical industry to a potentially serious health problem. Only since vinyl chloride was identified as a possible carcinogen, however, has there been an upsurge of interest in lowering the level of exposure in factories and in providing workers with adequate protective equipment and clothing. The labor unions involved, notably the United Rubber Workers, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers and the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, have been even more belated in their expressions of concern about the apparently unhealthy working environment in vinyl chloride plants.

Unfortunately, this has all too often been the story of industry's attitude toward health and safety problems.

Goodrich has performed an invaluable public service by uncovering and reporting the apparently lethal impact of vinyl chloride on the human liver. Since no one is certain what level of exposure, if any, is safe, the company and other companies that use the gas in the manufacture of plastics should now do everything possible to make their operations clean. The long-term goal should be a zero level of exposure, which has very nearly been achieved in modern chemical plants.

The Kentucky Occupational Safety and Health Standard Board, meanwhile, has acted with commendable speed in reducing the permissible concentration of vinyl chloride fumes in places of employment from 500 parts per million parts of air to 50. That standard must now be strictly enforced.

The most important result of the vinyl chloride saga, however, should be a change in the attitude still prevalent in some segments of American industry. The first hint of an occupational disease should be taken seriously, and the suspected cause should be regarded as guilty until proved innocent.

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