top of the news

FDA recalls sleep aid

The Food and Drug Administration last week ordered J.B. Williams (New York) to recall its Sominex 2 nonprescription sleep aid and halt all promotion and sale of the product. FDA says the move was made because diphenhydramine, the ingredient found in Sominex 2, has not been approved for over-the-counter sale.

Diphenhydramine is still available as a prescription antihistamine.

Williams stresses that its 20-year-old original Sominex product, which contains ingredients different from those in Sominex 2, is unaffected by the order. Sominex 2 was introduced in July.

In another development, an FDA panel of outside scientific advisors reported preliminary results of a three-year review of ingredients found in nonprescription sleep aids, sedatives and stimulants. Of 23 ingredients studied, only caffeine was certified safe and effective.

The panel outrightly challenged use of two ingredients—scopolamine and bromides—and questioned the need for sale of nonprescription daytime sedatives. The scientists did acknowledge the value served by marketing sleep aids.

If FDA accepts the recommendations, ingredients deemed unsafe or ineffective would have to be removed by about 1977. Makers of products whose ingredients are still questionable would be given three years to prove their value and safety.

Spinoff inquiry settled

The Federal Power Commission has approved Pennzoil's spinoff of its United Gas Pipe Line Co. affiliate, ending an inquiry that began in May 1974. FPC had questioned whether terms of the spinoff would hurt United Gas financially and raised questions about the pipeline company's future gas supplies.

Pennzoil common stockholders received about 9.918 million shares of United common in the deal. United also paid Pennzoil a dividend of 1 million preferred shares, valued at $100 million. As part of the settlement approved by FPC, Pennzoil will return the preferred stock and dividends to United and give it right of first refusal to buy all new gas reserves developed by Pennzoil or its affiliates from leases acquired before 1980 in United's service area.

Pennzoil says it decided on the spinoff because the regulatory climate puts affiliated producers at a disadvantage competitive with unaffiliated firms.



CAPACITORS: Big potential market for dielectric fluid—a replacement for PCBs.

PCB substitute debuts

A new insulating fluid to replace polychlorinated biphenyls in high-voltage power capacitors has been developed by Dow Chemical and McGraw-Edison's power systems division (Canonsburg, Pa.). Dow will have the capacity to produce 1 million lbs./year of the fluid, a butylated monochlorodiphenyl oxide, at its Midland, Mich., plant by early 1976, and McGraw-Edison will market the capacitors by mid-1976.

The market for these capacitors, used to compensate for voltage lags in transmission lines, is said to be up to 200,000 units per year. Amount of dielectric fluid in the average 200-kv., unit is about 3 gal.

Monsanto, sole U.S. producer of PCBs, now makes 40 million lbs./year of the material, which has been under fire from environmentalists for its toxicity and persistence (*CW, Dec. 3, p. 40*). Estimates of the percentage of total PCBs that are used in the high-voltage capacitors range from 25% by McGraw-Edison to "less than 15%" by Monsanto.

"We're betting that regulatory action will be taken against PCBs," says McGraw-Edison's marketing vice-president, William S. Kingsolver, noting that the high-voltage capacitors with the Dow fluid would cost about 10% more than those using PCBs.

Louis Carmouche, general manager of Dow's Functional Products & Systems Dept., says the new fluid works at least as well electrically as PCBs and is "environmentally sound"—40 times more biodegradable and 20 times less toxic than PCBs.

And with a fire temperature of 199 C, compared with PCBs' 316 C, the Dow fluid is more easily incinerated. But it is less resistant to high temperatures.

Drug price debate

The first in a series of public sessions on the Federal Trade Commission's proposal to liberalize prescription drug price advertising was held in Chicago last week (*CW, Dec. 3, p. 13*).

FTC's proposed rule would knock down all state restrictions on prescription drug price advertising except for drugs regulated by the Controlled Substances Act. The agency reported 29 states still have some restrictions on price disclosure.

Donald R. Baugher, vice-president of the Illinois Pharmaceutical Assn., said that his group does not actively oppose the concept of advertising prices but is against the FTC proposal.

He maintained that FTC has failed to decide what it means by price information. Any prescription drug advertising, Baugher stated, should have to include information about a particular drug's special use characteristics to make sure the consumer is fully informed about indications, contraindications and possible side effects.

Celia Maloney, director of the Governor's Consumer Advocate Office, spoke in favor of the proposal, asserting that the disparity in drug prices is "often enormous." She called FTC's planned rule "just the first step," and urged FTC to investigate what she termed the "monopoly" held by brandname drugs.

Wisconsin Lieutenant Governor Martin J. Schreiber asked FTC to make it mandatory for pharmacists to post drug prices in their stores. He said that in Wisconsin "pharmacists have chosen to avoid" advertising drug prices, even though the state has permitted it since January 1974.

Craig W. Sandahl, president of Federal Prescription Service (Madrid, Ia.), a mail-order prescription firm, declared that the FTC rule was "long overdue" but cautioned the agency not to force pharmacists to post or advertise prices. "The competitive nature of the industry will take its course," he said.

Patent rights denied

A decision by a U.S. District Court in New York last week bars M&T Chemicals (Rahway, N.J.) from claiming title to U.S. patent 3,354,059 or its foreign equivalents. The patent, assigned to IBM Corp. (Armonk, N.Y.) in November 1967, relates to the electrodeposition of nickel-iron magnetic alloy films.

Judge Robert L. Carter denied M&T's

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