



Current Report

Carcinogens

UNION CARBIDE FINDS NO CORRELATION BETWEEN CANCER CASES, PLANT EXPOSURES

Epidemiological studies by Union Carbide Corporation failed to find any correlation between brain cancer cases discovered at a Union Carbide petrochemical plant in Texas City, Texas, and employee exposures to chemicals used or manufactured at the facility, the company announced Nov. 11.

In a letter mailed to each employee at Texas City, Plant Manager Damon L. Engle and Plant Physician David H. Glenn said that the excessive occurrence of brain cancer "may represent a chance occurrence" and is not a result of any chemical exposure at the plant.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reported last year that they had found 18, and possibly as many as 25, brain cancer cases among employees at the Texas City plant. That was about twice the incidence rate found among the surrounding population, the agencies reported (Current Report, Oct. 30, 1980, p. 573).

Union Carbide's study, begun in 1979, found 12 deaths due to primary malignant brain cancer among the 6,588 Texas City employees studied. By comparison with U.S. rates, 7.42 cases would have been expected, the company stated.

The overall mortality rate of employees working at Texas City since 1941 is "significantly less" than the national average, 765 observed compared with 923.82 expected, according to the company.

Three reasons for labeling the four or five excess deaths a chance occurrence were given by Engle and Glenn:

- The company was unable to associate the deaths with any particular chemical exposures.

- The types of brain cancer found are present in the same percentages as those seen among the general population. Ordinarily, the company maintained, chemically caused cancer is a specific and often unusual type, different than those seen in the general population.

- Excessive brain cancer has not been confirmed in any chemical plant similar to the Carbide facility in any other part of the U.S.

"There is no cause for alarm," the company officials told the Texas City employees. They added that deaths due to cancer, "however small in number," will "continue to receive our attention and concern," and that Carbide will continue its investigations and cooperation with NIOSH in the agency's own on-going study.

Union Carbide said it expects that the NIOSH study will reflect conclusions similar to those of the Carbide investigation. Both studies used a common data base that includes the health and work histories of 6,588 workers who have been employed at the Texas City plant since 1941, according to the company.

Current standards and practices at the Texas City facility "provide more than adequate protection from known health hazards," Union Carbide asserted.

The Carbide study was reviewed by Dr. Brian McMahon of Harvard University and Dr. Philip Enterline of the University of Pittsburgh.

NIOSH Responds

A spokeswoman for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, while stressing that the institute was pleased with the cooperative professional relationship it has experienced with Union Carbide, nonetheless questioned some of the company's interpretations of the data.

Spokeswoman Deborah Van Brunt told BNA Nov. 16 that, although NIOSH could corroborate the overall results reported by the company, an additional finding was made of a threefold increased risk among employees who worked at the plant 20 years or longer. In addition, NIOSH said it was aware of 23 — not 12 — brain cancer cases, as reported in its preliminary findings in August 1980.

The institute also took issue with the three reasons stated by Carbide for speculating that the excess may have been due to chance.

First, the institute acknowledged that the failure to find a correlation between particular exposures and the cases was "important evidence" but maintained that such evidence does not rule out an occupational hazard as the cause. Van Brunt added that the cause may be traceable instead to a class of chemicals or certain chemicals in combination with one another.

Second, the institute stated that brain cancer in general, as well as the types of brain cancer found at the plant, indeed represent an unusual and specific cause of death. Five such deaths usually are found among 100,000 white males in the general population, the institute maintained, making it the sort of "unusual" cancer attributed to chemical exposures by Carbide. In addition, the institute questioned that company assumption, saying that common types of cancer are related to occupational exposures as often as are unusual types.

Third, the institute, while acknowledging that no similar excess had been confirmed at other locations, contended that unconfirmed higher-than-expected incidence rates found at several plants "raise a very strong suggestion of brain cancer as an occupational hazard." NIOSH gave as an example a Union Carbide plant at South Charleston, W.Va., which it said used similar chemicals to those at the Texas City facility. A twofold brain cancer excess was found there, it noted.

Appropriations

HOUSE APPROVES STOPGAP FUNDING BILL, REJECTING PROPOSAL FOR IMMEDIATE CUTS

The House of Representatives Nov. 16 approved a continuing resolution that would provide stopgap funding through the end of this fiscal year for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other agencies not yet appropriated funds by Congress.

The bill (HJRes 357) was passed by a vote of 195 to 187 after the House rejected by 201 to 189 a White-House backed amendment seeking to institute a 5 percent funding reduction in levels set by the stopgap legislation. The across-the-board amendment, introduced by House Minority Leader Robert Michel (R-Ill), was seen as an attempt to put into law at least part of the President's September request for a sweeping 12 percent cut in domestic programs.

The new continuing resolution will affect OSHA, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and the