

Amoco Studies Brain Tumors Among Its Staff

Lab Near Chicago Is Closed As Unusual Incidence Of Disease Is Discovered

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Amoco Corp. said its chemical unit is investigating an unaccountably high rate of brain tumors in the past decade among scientists at a research center in suburban Chicago.

Studies by medical researchers hired by Amoco Chemical have found no link between the incidence of tumors—10 cases since 1982 — and the center in Naperville, Ill. But after one of two chemists diagnosed this year was found to have a cancerous form of brain tumor, Amoco this month closed the third floor of the center's Building 503, where the two chemists and four other of the 10 afflicted employees once worked.

"We wanted to do something proactive and safeguard our employees, who are of course concerned," said George Kwiatkowski, manager of new business research and development at Amoco Chemical. "It was one move we could make while we continue our investigation."

Of the 10 afflicted with the brain tumors, one has died. All of the them, assigned to various laboratories at the campus-like research center, worked with organic chemicals, none of which are known to cause tumors of the brain. To unravel the mystery, Amoco officials said yesterday that a team of researchers from the University of Alabama has been hired to conduct a two-year probe, going back to 1970. "We're not taking chances," a company spokesman said.

The medical community knows little about what causes brain tumors. The only certain risk factor is exposure to radiation, according to J. Fred Annegers, professor of epidemiology at the University of Texas's School of Public Health in Houston, though there is also suspected danger in exposure to vinyl chloride during its manufacture.

And the job of determining whether the grouping of 10 cases of this kind of tumor is, in fact, a "cluster" of related tumors is viewed as among the most daunting in medicine. "It's an extraordinarily difficult epidemiological exercise," said Baruch Fellner, a workplace-safety lawyer and former director of enforcement for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Complicating the task for Amoco is that the 10 employees were diagnosed with four

different kinds of tumors. Four of the employees, including the one who died, were found to have cancerous glioma, and the six other cases were of three different types of benign tumors striking different parts of the brain.

The unusual occurrence of the tumors, reported by the Chicago Tribune yesterday, caught Amoco's attention in 1989, when managers learned that research center chemists had just been diagnosed. The company at that time formed a task force and hired a number of experts, including specialists from the Mayo Clinic and the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois-Chicago. But they found no causal relationship.

"The employees weren't being exposed to anything unusual," said Paul Levy, director of the division of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of Illinois's School of Public Health. "It will take a while to unravel this."

Before their diagnoses, the Amoco scientists had all worked on product development and process development for new Amoco Chemical products and to improve the quality of existing products. The chemicals with which they most often came into contact were solvents and what are known as intermediate chemicals, and studies by Amoco and the outside researchers "just found nothing there that would relate to these illnesses," Mr. Kwiatkowski said. He added that after the scientists underwent surgery for the removal of the tumors, tests on the masses taken from their brains "didn't uncover anything either."

Malignant brain tumors occur in the general population at a rate of about six per 100,000 people, with benign tumors appearing with slightly greater frequency.

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