

GREENSBORO DAILY NEWS

Published Every Day in the Year By Greensboro News Company.

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1972

Section A

Plastic humans?

Dr. George W. A. Milne, a chemist at the National Heart Institute in Bethesda, Md., disclosed the other day that Americans are gradually becoming plastic. Last year he made tests on what he considered "a fairly typical population group" of 100 persons and found chemicals from plastics in the bloodstreams of 86.

So far as Dr. Milne knows, there is no immediate danger to the 86. But along with many other scientists and health officials he is worried about the lack of knowledge as to the long-range effects on humans of some of the chemicals in the millions of tons of plastics all around them.

The chemicals Dr. Milne found in the 86 human bloodstreams are plasticizers known as phthalate esters. They are used in making a wide variety of products from water bottles to insect repellants and food wraps. Apparently they get into the human bloodstream when they escape into the air or are dissolved out by such materials as fats, blood and milk.

Phthalates have killed embryonic chicken heart cells in tests. Dr. Milne and other scientists are concerned over the possibility that plasticizers seeping into the human

body over long periods might have adverse effects on the body's cells.

Both the chemical companies and the Food and Drug Administration emphasize that no toxic effects have been demonstrated in humans. The fact is that neither the FDA nor the companies have done enough research on the effects of plasticizers to be entitled to an opinion. Plastics manufacturers are looking for a method of binding to plasticizers so the latter could not escape. But they have not succeeded so far.

Dr. Milne's discovery of plastic residues in human bloodstreams points up again the danger in what is essentially the public-be-damned attitude of the chemical makers, the food processors and the FDA. They go on the theory that a new chemical is innocent unless and until a large number of unwitting human guinea pigs prove it is harmful.

The point is there is simply not enough research and pre-testing in this field. And financial support for research is practically nonexistent from the chemical companies or the federal government. The situation will change for the better only if Congress requires either the chemical companies or the FDA to make adequate safety tests on new chemicals and substances before they are turned loose on the public.

Dr. Milne himself summed up the case against the current official policy. He said: "I think one should worry about anything that is absorbed from the outside, because that is by definition a pollutant. It may be that some are quite harmless, but I would assume that none is harmless unless proved otherwise."

Quotable Quote (by Dorothy L. Sayers in the introduction to "The Third Omnibus of Crime"): "Death seems to provide the minds of the Anglo-Saxon race with a greater fund of innocent amusement than any other single object ... the tale must be about dead bodies or very wicked people, preferably both, before the Tired Business Man can feel really happy."