

The Morning Union

from: P. "

VOL. 119, NO. 7

SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, MONDAY, JANUARY 11, 1982

42 PAGES

20 CENTS

Cancer link hunted at Monsanto

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AMHERST — A new study of cancer deaths among former employees of the Monsanto Co. chemical plant in Springfield has found the fatalities may be linked to exposure to materials used in making plastics.

A team from the University of Massachusetts investigating the deaths of 110 men who worked at the Monsanto plant in Springfield's Indian Orchard section found 34 were caused by cancer and may have been work-related.

Dr. Kenneth Rosenman, who headed the study, said, "People who

worked there longer, who had a longer latency period, had higher risks of dying of all malignant neoplasms (abnormal tissue growths)."

The study was the fifth conducted at the company since union officials began demanding an investigation into cancer deaths of former employees in 1977.

Monsanto's epidemiology manager, William Gaffey of St. Louis, said of the new study, "I think we'll know within a couple of weeks whether there really is any connection between these excesses and any past exposures in the plant."

The study was of former employees who worked at the plant while

the chemicals vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride were used between 1948 and 1975.

The research team found one death due to a liver cancer associated with exposure to vinyl chloride and said several other former workers had mouth, digestive, lymphatic and lung cancers.

Older workers were found to have a greater risk of contracting cancer, even with a short exposure to the plastics studied.

Monsanto is also reviewing a similar study the company contracted with University of Pittsburgh professor Dr. Gary Marsh, who finished that study last spring. He said

cancer deaths were excessive but could not be explained because "it was virtually impossible to isolate exposure to individual chemicals."

Rosenman criticized the company-sponsored studies, however, saying they "always looked at the total work force, not at individual work sites . . . diluting" the studies' results, he said.

Rosenman said his study, conducted with the aid of a group of University of Massachusetts toxicology graduate students, looked at two specific work sites in the Monsanto plant.

The research team went through employees' medical records looking

for types of cancer linked in past studies with exposure to vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride, he said.

Another portion of the study to be released shortly will look at a possible link between exposure to the chemical formaldehyde and an extremely rare form of lung cancer which already has been found in one former Monsanto employee who worked with that substance, Rosenman said.

Roger Soucy, president of the local chapter of the International Union of Electrical Workers said, "The thing I

See MONSANTO
Page 4

MONSANTO

Continued from Page 1

find perturbing is that everything we run into by doctors or anybody else doing research is that it may be this or may be that, it could be that or it could be this . . . nobody ever comes out with anything definite."

But Rosenman said, "It is very difficult in anything like this to speak in terms of absolutes. And you have to remember that many of these workers worked with up to 200 other chemicals," which makes pinpointing cause-and-effect relationships

between specific chemicals and cancer difficult, he said.

Monsanto, the nation's fourth largest chemical company, employs approximately 2,000 at its Springfield installation.

The plant manufactures a wide variety of plastics for consumer and industrial uses, including polystyrene, ABS and SANS plastics, formaldehyde resins and phenolic resins.

The Springfield plant is part of Monsanto Plastics and Resins Co.

RSV 0007061