

ENOUGH CAUTION AGAINST THE RISK?

Now that a link between vinyl chloride and rare liver cancer is considered quite probable, the state and federal agencies concerned with occupational health and the companies that use this chemical in their manufacturing processes must take extraordinary steps to prevent workers from being exposed to its lethal vapors.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and Kentucky's Occupational Safety and Health Administration have proposed a 90 per cent reduction in the amount of vinyl chloride vapor that can be present in work areas. NIOSH has recommended "interim controls" to protect workers at the B.F. Goodrich Co. plant in Louisville, where vinyl chloride has been tentatively blamed for the cancer deaths of four men and could have something to do with liver disease and blood abnormalities detected in a number of others. The federal agency is also engaged in several studies to verify the suspected connections between the chemical and the high incidence of the fatal disease in Goodrich's Louisville work force.

But is that really going far enough? While it is true that vinyl chloride has not yet been proved guilty and that there is considerable uncertainty as to the degree of exposure necessary to cause cancer, the risk may be great enough to justify closing down operations that use the chemical unless workers can be protected from it totally.

Federal and state occupational safety inspectors look askance these days at unsafe machinery, rickety ladders, poor ventilation, dirty restrooms or anything else in a place of employment that might be hazardous to life and limb. Neither they nor the companies involved should be willing to tolerate even the slightest exposure of workers to a substance that is strongly suspected of being a killer.

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An estimated 6,000 Americans are employed in manufacturing operations that use vinyl chloride. A number of them could become ill before all the studies are complete.

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