

OFFICIAL ASSAILS CANCER INSTITUTE

Scientist Calls Strong Curb on Exposure to Vinyl Chloride 'Irrational'

By DAVID BURNHAM
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 6—A key Federal official has denounced the scientists of the National Cancer Institute as "a lot of old fogies" and has described as "an irrational decision" a Government requirement that workers be exposed to virtually no vinyl chloride.

The criticism was voiced by Dr. Herbert E. Stockinger, who occupies prominent positions in both the Federal agency now responsible for establishing industrial exposure levels and the professional association that has recommended these standards for many years.

The position of the cancer institute and other Federal agencies is that exposure to even the smallest amounts of vinyl chloride—the chemical base of a widely used plastic—should be avoided by workers because it has been shown to cause cancer at very low levels of exposure and because its safety has not been demonstrated at any level.

Dr. Stockinger is chief of the toxicology branch of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the Federal agency established in 1970 to develop industrial exposure levels. He is also chairman of the committee on threshold limits of the American Conference of Governmental Hygienists, an organization whose recommended standards have dominated health practices in the United States and scores of other countries for many years.

Criticized Institute

The official criticized the cancer institute during a telephone interview when asked about a letter in which he said the Government's vinyl chloride requirement was wrong.

The letter, a copy of which has been obtained by The New York Times, was addressed to Dr. Marcus M. Key, the recently retired director of the Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and Dr. Stockinger's superior.

"I was consternated, as were

many others, with the National Cancer Institute's decision to set exposure levels for vinyl chloride," Dr. Stockinger's letter began.

In making the irrational decision it is clear to us that you have fallen into the fallacious trap of believing that because the substance produces three percent of the cancer rate in humans (and in the same laboratory aided by promoters), then exposure at all concentrations is wrong.

In the interview last week, Dr. Stockinger stood by his criticism of the Government's position on vinyl chloride, which he charged had been made for "political and other reasons."

Dr. Stockinger then was asked about the statement of Dr. Frank J. Rauscher, director of the National Cancer program of the cancer institute, that repeated exposures to 250 parts per million of vinyl chloride should be regarded as a carcinogenic risk.

"The safety of vinyl chloride has not been demonstrated at any level; there is no practical scientific method to prove experimentally the safety of any level of exposure to a carcinogen," Dr. Rauscher said.

"Oh, there are a lot of old fogies over there at the National Cancer Institute," Dr. Stockinger replied.

Dr. Key, who received Dr. Stockinger's letter, now is a professor of occupational medicine at the University of Texas's School of Public Health in Houston.

Asked about the letter, Dr. Key said that though he had the "utmost respect for Dr. Stockinger, I think I just let it drop."

The threshold limits committee that Dr. Stockinger heads has recommended exposure levels for more than 500 individual chemicals or families of chemicals since it was formed in the late nineteenth century. These standards were accepted as a package by the Federal Government in 1971 under the law creating the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, pending the slow process of a complete review.

U.S.S.R. an Exception

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In another Government health development the institute for occupational health has begun proceedings to discharge one of its scientists after he accused the institute of needlessly exposing American workers to the risk of cancer.

The allegation was made a little more than two months ago by Dr. Stanley C. Mazaleski, in an affidavit filed in Federal court.

On March 19, the institution which has denied the charge, informed Dr. Mazaleski that his services would "be terminated because of marginal or sub-standard performance by you." The scientist, who is challenging his dismissal, said that the action was "an act of retaliation because of my criticism."