

Ideas & Trends

Education, Religion, Mental Health

What Is Being Done About Jobs That Can Kill

By JANE E. BRODY

The recent disclosure that four workers in a vinyl chloride plant had developed a rare and fatal liver cancer led to an industrywide search and the discovery, so far, of 21 such cases.

The Department of Labor has concluded hearings on new limits to worker exposure to vinyl chloride, which is a chemical that forms the basis for thousands of plastic products, ranging from tablecloths and phonograph records to water pipes and insulation.

The vinyl chloride findings are only the latest of many instances of occupationally caused cancers. The first was in 1775, when Percivall Pott, an English surgeon, published a medical report describing a high incidence of cancer of the scrotum among the chimney sweeps of London. Dr. Pott's report inspired a ruling three years later by the Danish Chimney Sweepers Guild that its members should have daily baths to prevent accumulation of cancer-causing soot. Relatively few subsequent discoveries of job-related cancers or other occupational diseases have resulted in prompt protective action.

Danger and Delay

Benzidine, a chemical used in the dye industry, was first described in 1929 by a British factory doctor as suspected of causing cancer of the bladder. In 1955, an American doctor, Mitchell R. Zavon, began compiling bladder cancer cases among workers in a Cincinnati plant. But it was not until 1972 that Dr. Zavon disclosed his findings to Federal authorities responsible for protecting the health



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of American workers. And it was not until a year ago that Federal rules took effect to prevent worker exposure to benzidine and 13 other known and suspected occupational carcinogens.

Asbestos is a ubiquitous fibrous mineral used for everything from food processing filters to construction materials to brake linings. It has been known for two decades to cause invariably fatal cancers and disabling lung disease. Workers are still not protected, despite a Government ruling. Two years ago, the Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration decided to lower the worker exposure standard from five to two fibers per cubic centimeter of air. But at the industry's urging, the agency delayed the effective date of the ruling until 1976. As a result

workers may be inhaling as many as 12.5-billion potentially lethal fibers each year when a level one-fifth that has already been shown to produce cancer in man.

This week a Senate subcommittee is holding hearings on alleged Labor Department foot-dragging on asbestos standards. The charges are that the Nixon Administration deliberately went easy on industry in return for campaign pledges.

The Government is now proposing that the exposure limit of 500 parts of vinyl chloride per million parts of air be lowered to "no detectable level," or one part per million parts of air. The proposal is based on the scientific tenet that there is no "safe" level of a cancer-causing agent.

At the hearings, company representatives asserted the ruling would be "economically not feasible." It would, they said, shut down the entire industry and result in the loss of perhaps 700,000 jobs. Labor sources condemned the conclusion as "hysterical," and Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of Mount Sinai Hospital, an authority on occupational diseases, pointed out that the Dow Chemical Company had already brought its levels down to below 10 parts per million, with every indication that they can be readily reduced still further.

A Classic Battle

Until the hearings, industry had been extremely cooperative in helping researchers define and control the vinyl chloride hazard. But now the fight is shaping up along classic lines: labor vs. industry and industry vs. Government regulation.

And there is every indication that similar battles will be waged in the years to come. Some 15,000 chemical and physical agents are in industrial use now; hundreds are introduced each year, most of which are untested for disease-causing potential. Assistant Secretary of Labor John H. Stender, head of the three-year-old Occupational Safety and Health Administration, has warned that Government action to protect worker health has only just begun.

As he put it recently: "Research so enthusiastically poured into finding profitable uses for new substances must be expanded to include determining how safe these substances are. Any doubt must be resolved on the side of the employee."

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