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Claims Over 1949 Nitro Plant Blast Baffle State

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An explosion that occurred almost five years ago at the Monsanto Chemical plant in Nitro has resulted in about 230 complaints to the state Compensation Commission which Commissioner George W. Stokes admits have the department "baffled."

The blast occurred in one of contamination from the exploded three autoclaves, a large-scale material tentatively identified as pressure cooker, when the safety valve and pipe connections blew out and splashed the contents throughout the building and over the surrounding terrain.

Stokes said that several days following the March, 1949, accident in Nitro, the commission received requests for compensation to a number of workmen injured in the blast.

Since then, and following the passage of the July, 1949, Occupational Disease Law, the commission has been asked to compensate for "rashes, aches and pains" alleged to have developed as a result of

Stokes said the firm was not able to positively identify the mixture because of the uncertainty of the state of the process at the time of the accident.

An investigation into the ailments developed by several workmen following the explosion led former Commissioner Curtis B. Trent Jr., and Monsanto and union officials to suspend the inquiry pending the outcome of the alleged injuries, Stokes said.

However, 77 of the Monsanto workmen decided to collect compensation on their own through an attorney last September. That move was followed by individual requests of some 200 other employees who claimed disability due to exposure.

Stokes said a thorough investigation was begun with the appointment of a special examining board composed of three doctors—Henry Warden Jr., of Bluefield; John E. Stone, of Huntington; and Francis C. Prundy, of Parkersburg.

Stokes said the physicians diagnosed the rash which appeared on a number of the men as chlor-acne, a skin disorder caused by exposure to vapors of a phenolic compound.

One of the men who was brought up to his office Thursday had two "large, black, greasy" spots under his eyes and on his cheeks, Stokes said. Another man displayed roughened fingernails which he

said were a result of exposure to the compound.

The three doctors also brought along four rats which they were using to conduct experiments in an effort to find a solution to the problem.

Stokes said one of the rodents, which was dead, developed a blackened condition under its fur. The other experimental rodents, also appeared to be "in an unhealthy condition," Stokes said.

Conducting the investigation is Dr. John P. Brick, of Charleston, chairman of the Commission's Occupational Disease Board.

Stokes said no conclusive evidence has yet been found which would enable the commission to either reject or approve the requests.

Priority is being afforded the first 77 men who are represented by an attorney, Stokes said. An inquiry into the other claims will be held as soon as possible.

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