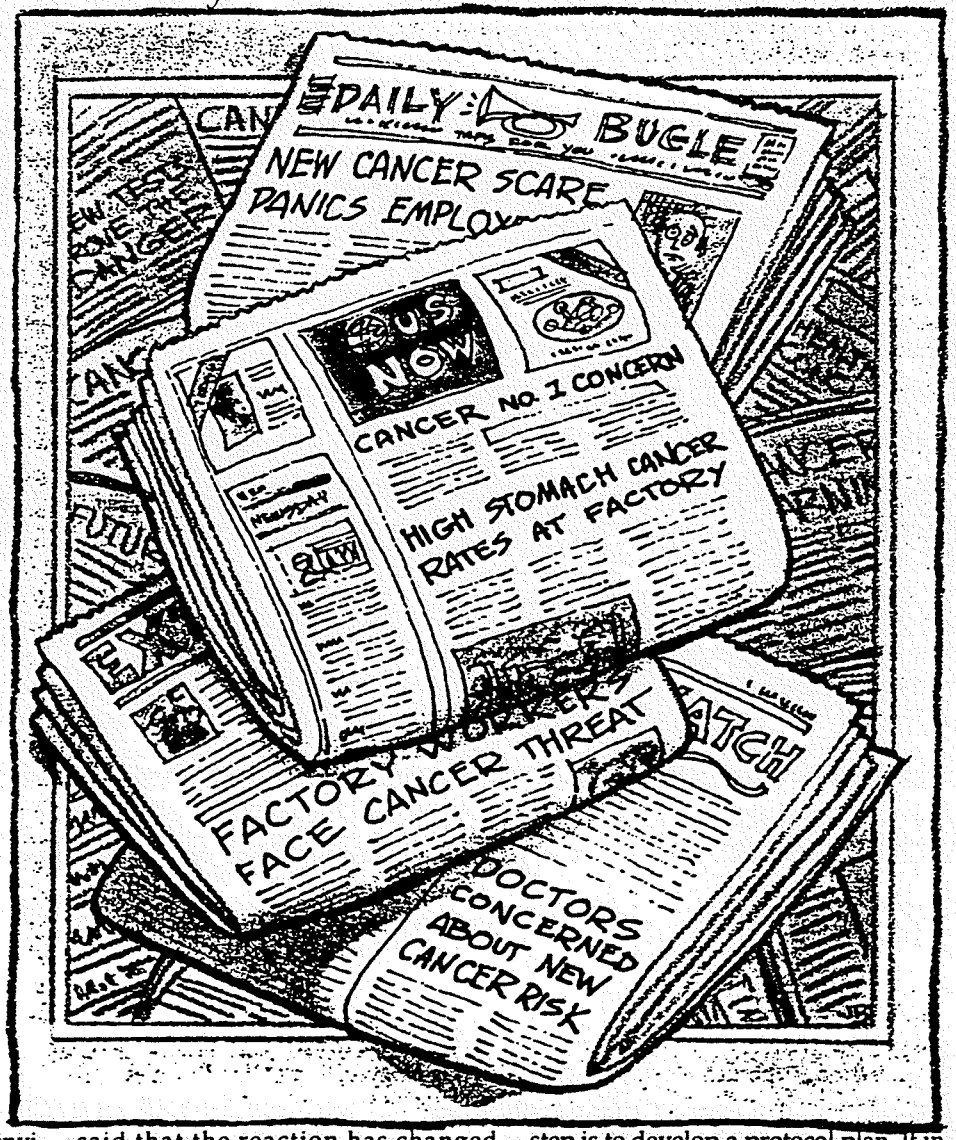
COPING WITH THE "C" WORD

The word "cancer" once sent shock waves through the workplace. Now, at some companies, news of a possible cancer risk is less frightening.

By S.L. Smith



John Beukemann

Cancer. One of the most feared words in the English language. Until recently, just the mention of an increased cancer risk in the workplace caused almost as much anxiety and dread as news of an on-the-job fatality. Cancer wasn't something employers wanted to discuss publicly and when word of a cancer risk leaked out, fear enveloped the workplace and surrounding community.

That traumatic response may be changing, especially at larger companies. Epidemiology studies have become commonplace in many industries. In the past 10 years, companies have been sharing information with plant employees, the surrounding community, and the news media. The practice, say experts, of making the disclosures has been beneficial for both employees and employers.

Dow Chemical Co., Midland, Mich., has been conducting epidemiology studies for approximately 25 years. For the past 10 years, employees have been notified about the study results.

When the company first started this practice, said Gregory G. Bond, Dow's manager of environmental, health, and regulatory affairs for the chemicals and performance products business, "there was some concern among employees because it was something we hadn't done previously. People reacted to it like, 'Why are you telling me this? There must be something more to it than just this information you are giving me.'"

Bond, who previously headed the epidemiology department at Dow, said that the reaction has changed dramatically in 10 years.

"The reaction now is, 'Gee, it's nice to know the company cares about my health,'" he said, adding that this is especially prevalent among people who may have separated from the company years ago.

In the Beginning

Among companies which regularly conduct epidemiology studies, the first step is to develop a protocol plan. It includes who will be studied, what exposures will be observed, and how the study will progress.

At Dow, union representatives often aid in the development of the protocol, which is submitted for outside review. At Monsanto Co., St. Louis, protocols are developed by the epidemiology department and reviewed by both a peer group from outside of Monsanto and by an internal ethics committee. At both

DSW 134164

STLCOPCB4034122

companies, unions or employee groups compile information about study results and provide them to employees.

According to Dr. Patrick Conner, area medical director for Monsanto, employee groups and union leadership have helped review letters before they are mailed out to employees. "They have been quite helpful at clarifying some things and knowing what questions will need to be answered," he said.

The unions at Dow have been influential in getting workers to participate in studies, said Bond. "If the employer and the union tell the workers that this a valuable thing and it's going to benefit them and their coworkers, they're more inclined to participate," he commented.



Dow's Bond offers detailed explainations of study results to both employees and the media. This openness "has really paid dividends for the company."

Whispering at the Water Cooler

Some years ago, during the "father-knows-best" days of employer/employee relationships, workers sometimes weren't told about matters affecting their health in the workplace, said Dr. Clark Heath, vice president for epidemiology and statistics, American Cancer Society. He said that information was received second- or thirdhand, and was often incorrect or incomplete.

Everyone knows that the company grapevine is fast and often effective, but like the game of telephone played by children, the final messages delivered to employees through the grapevine sometimes can be completely different than the original ones, he concluded.

"If a workup of a problem was delayed, or the communication about what was going on with a study was incomplete or nonexistent, anxiety grew. Then, when the study was done, even if it showed no risk, there was already a lot of anxiety built up," said Heath.

Instead, said Heath, workers should know when a health study is being conducted. They should also be given periodic updates on how a study is progressing, he said. "Workers need to be dealt in," he commented. "Otherwise, anxiety, fear, and stress grow."

That occurs at Monsanto, where employees are notified that a study will be conducted as soon as a protocol is approved. At that point, the company tries to include any unions or employee groups in the undertaking.

Monsanto has six to eight epidemiological studies ongoing at any given time, said Dr. Jim Collins, head of epidemiology for the company. If employee interest warrants it, Monsanto will hold meetings to discuss a study's progress. Studies may take anywhere from three months to three years, and Collins pointed out that three years is a long time to wait for information.

"We might say, for example, that we plan to have the study completed in six months, that we've collected all the data, and that we're in the process of having it evaluated and put into a form for presentation," said Collins.

One of the key interests of Monsanto, when conducting studies, is to look at exposures that occur in the plants. Collins said that the company usually works with a group of employees who know about the exposures being examined. Those employees are kept informed about the the study's progress, and they pass the information along to coworkers.

Being Honest

Once a study has been started, Collins said, Monsanto strives to be "open and honest in all phases of the investigation. We consider communication to be very, very important."

Communication about potential health effects must walk that thin line between too little information and too much.

"Put information into terms that are understandable to workers, and, in the process, don't oversimplify," said the American Cancer Society's Heath, who conceded, "That is no easy task."

It is also acceptable, and even encouraged by some experts, to admit that a study was inconclusive, or that there are questions management just can't answer.

"I have found that it increases credibility with employees to admit you don't know something," said Bond. "You don't have to know everything. People can accept that you don't know something and it's O.K. with them."

Another thing to remember: "Employees can sense when a company is putting its own spin on results," said Heath, "and if an employee is given reason to doubt one piece of information, then he will be more likely to doubt all the information."

Discussing Study Results

Dow has regularly scheduled safety meetings for employees, at which time the results of an epidemiology study may be discussed, said Bond. The company also posts study results on bulletin boards around the workplace and runs study results in its internal company newsletter. Company officials also meet with the local news media and review with them every study conducted at the company.

"In some cases, if we have findings we think people who may have worked for the company years ago may have an interest in, we will send letters to their homes and invite them to a series of presentations," said Bond.

Dow plant management kicks off these meetings by introducing medical department personnel and epidemiologists. An epidemiologist typically presents the study results and answers any questions. Often, industrial hygienists will participate to discuss current exposures and relate them to past exposures if the results come from a retrospective study.

Dr. John Laszlow, senior vice president for research, American Cancer Society, said one of the most important aspects of communication is to put information into relative terms for em-



ployees. He compared telling employees about possible health risks to notifying a patient of surgery risks.

"A surgeon will sit down with a patient about to undergo hernia surgery and tell him that he's in good health and that the type of surgery he is about to undergo has relatively low risks. The surgeon will also say that the patient will be given anesthesia, and, as a result, he might die from its side effects. We don't expect that to happen, the doctor will say, but it could. The doctor has discharged his obligation. He didn't magnify risks. He didn't hide risks. He was honest. Employers have to be honest," said Laszlow.

Bond at Dow says the company informs employees about relative risk. For example, if a study finds that employees working in a particular area have a threefold risk of cancer, Bond presents the findings in absolute risk terms. "If the risk of getting cancer of the prostate is 1 in 100, perhaps because of this occupational exposure, the risk is 3 in 100," he said.

Bond said the company also discusses lifestyle changes, such as exercise, stopping smoking, and adopting healthy eating habits to reduce health risks.

Employee Response

The news of a possible cancer risk or exposure can trigger a range of various responses in people. Some employees don't seem to care, while others panic.

Monsanto recently mailed out 8,000 letters and questionnaires to employees and former employees who had been exposed to a product the company quit making in the 1950s. A rare form of cancer had been linked to the production of the product.

WORKER NOTIFICATION

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) conducts epidemiological studies which involve as few as 10 or 20 workers and as many as 15,000 or 20,000. The agency also has plenty of experience with worker notification.

Winifred L. Boal, an epidemiologist at NIOSH, discussed how the Institute handles studies and notification of workers.

Currently, NIOSH is doing notification on two different types of studies, said Boal. It consists of sorting through old studies, looking for ones that used good methodology and showed clearly positive results, and notifying the workers who participated in those studies. NIOSH also notifies workers who are participating in any current studies.

NIOSH sends letters to workers' homes, notifying them of the study results in lay language to the extent possible. Said Boal, "We try to translate technical information so people can understand it. Despite being faceless government bureaucrats, we try to be kind of sensitive," she added wryly.

Boal noted the difficulty in sending out a letter to someone "who may be retired and has not worked at the plant for 30 years and then, out of the blue, he gets a letter from Uncle Sam saying that because of an exposure he had long ago, he may be at risk of bladder cancer. The disclosure shocks people."

Boal said NIOSH has contracted with an outside academic researcher to conduct a formal evaluation of the notification process.

In the meantime, the agency relies on passive feedback. A postage-paid response card for comments is included in the letter, which also offers a toll-free number people can call to have their questions answered.

When working with a company in order to study the current worker population, NIOSH asks the company to post a notice about study results.

"We do our workup [of data] and then review the study and the literature. We write a memo about what we plan to do, draft materials to send to the workers, and send all the materials to the company management and union and say, 'This is how we intend to proceed; please comment on the materials.'"

If the study is record-based, which means employees were not involved in it, and the results were not positive, NIOSH posts a factsheet at the workplace, which explains the background of the study and discloses its findings. If workers participate, even if the results were not positive, NIOSH still sends a letter to their homes.

"It's a good idea to discuss results with employees," said Boal. "They have a right to know about information pertaining to them. Even if the study examined past exposures, there might be things they could do today to head off future problems."

Any materials given to employees should be kept at a simple reading level, advised Boal. "You don't want to talk down to employees, but you have to be aware there are varying literacy levels. Then again, you don't want to bore them to death either."

She admitted that NIOSH people tended to be interested in disease, "but most people are not, and that even includes people who are subjects."

The agency sends out a short cover letter which includes the most important, basic information about a study, and follows up with factsheets, which go into more detail. Company management and unions may review any information sent out by NIOSH. Boal said the Institute likes to work as closely as possible with all groups involved.

"People definitely consider the source of the information," she commented. "It is certainly best to have something signed by all parties. That's when the data become most believable."

If a management or labor group seriously disagrees with NIOSH's findings and a compromise can't be worked out, Boal said that NIOSH is willing to state the differing points of view or to include material from the company or union in the information letter.

"However," she said, "the position we take is that as the investigator, our interpretation is the most important and our notification materials have to convey our point of view."

Boal said that there have been companies which were very concerned about the reaction of their employees to the findings of NIOSH studies. For the most part, said Boal, "the news had no impact. It turned out to be a big nothing."

She said NIOSH gets various responses to the materials it mails out, but that the most prevalent response is gratitude.

"We get a lot of people saying thanks for the information; that they had been worrying about it for years; that it was information they had never had before; that they were glad we did the study."

DSW 134166

STLCOPCB4034124

According to James Collins, the company had a response rate on the questionnaires of 70 percent, and about 70 percent of the respondents asked for further information.

"We never got that high a response rate for anything else we've done. They said the results were very, very important. It was kind of heartening, because we always say that communication is important, and sometimes you just don't get the feeling that it is when talking to employees," he said.

The company included a phone number so that anyone with a question could call and talk to a physician. Conner fielded a number of those calls, and he acknowledged that the questions were wide-ranging.

"I was asked questions like, 'How did you find me?' 'I worked in the cafeteria, so what does this have to do with me? ' 'Is there a class action lawsuit because of this?'" said Conner.

He also said that there was some anger directed not at Monsanto, but at the people who conducted the study.

"They wanted to know, 'Why are you doing this to my plant? I worked there for 30 years and Monsanto was good to me and what are you saying about my plant?'"

Noted Conner: "Some of these people had worked at the company for a long time and had a good experience. They have a real emotional investment in the company."

The Psychology of Cancer

Laszlow has worked with a number of people suffering from cancer, and he offered some insight into the wide range of responses these studies engender among employees.

It is difficult for people to admit, said Laszlow, that their lifestyles — smoking, high-fat diet, little exercise — caused or contributed to their illness. It is more acceptable emotionally to them to say that the only thing which could have caused the cancer was their job.

"If you are in sales or marketing or most jobs, you don't know anything about health hazards. You expect your company to be square with you. If people find out they've been exposed to a health risk, they feel deceived by their own company. In a sense, they feel betrayed by their family," said Laszlow.

He said that while he has seen employees deny that their workplace might have exposed them to a health risk, he sees more cases where employees deny they could have gotten cancer from any place other than the workplace.

"They want to blame the industry. They want to think that information had been withheld from them. They are more angry than they are into denial," commented Laszlow.

Many company officials, when giving epidemiological information to employees, get blank looks and questions like "Why are you telling me this?" The reason for that response, said Laszlow, is pretty basic: They want to continue to work and earn a living.

"They have to go to work every day, and then you tell them that something in the workplace may cause them to have cancer. They think, 'I'm well paid and I'm going to die of something sometime.' Their livelihood depends on their employment," said Laszlow.

Even though employees' responses to study results may be apathetic, Laszlow insists that companies have an obligation to inform employees about dangers or health risks.

Said Monsanto's Collins: "We inundate employees with so much information — toxicity studies, MSDSs on products they're working with, and things like that — that by the time we tell them about epidemiology results, their eyes glaze over."

Collins added, however, "If it applies directly to them and there are findings they can grab onto and feel are important, then they're very, very interested."

Making Headlines

Public relations nightmares often ensue when news of a possible increase in cancer rates leaks out in the media. There are many reasons for this. Some companies truly do have some type of serious health risk, and the press finds out about it. Another reason is that some reporters, looking for juicy headlines, distort the truth.

To try to diminish negative coverage, both Dow and Monsanto keep in touch with the media before stories are written. Dow meets with interested newspeople whenever any study is conducted, regardless of the study results. Monsanto briefs the press on any study the company thinks might interest them.

Collins said that Monsanto makes sure that employees hear any news about the company before it is released to the press. "We don't want our employees or former employees first finding out about study results on the 6 o'clock news," he said.

A letter, sent out to 8,000 Monsanto employees, took three months to compose, and the company is equally careful about information it gives to the media. "That's not to say we haven't been burned," admitted Collins.

The Monsanto letter, referred to earlier, discussed a study which had turned up four cases of a very rare type of cancer among the thousands of people who had worked at a particular facility. Less than one case was expected.

Collins, Conner, and their staffs explained that while the risk of that particular cancer was elevated, the chances of getting it were still very small and that it was unlikely that other cases would turn up.

Because of good communication, with employees and the news media, the company avoided a shocking, sensationalistic headline like "Rare form of cancer found among Monsanto workers at four times expected level." That headline might have been basically correct, but it did not take into consideration that the chance of getting that type of cancer was perhaps 1 in 200,000 to begin with.

To avoid scare headlines, Dow has built a relationship with local reporters Bond offers them background information about epidemiological studies, and informs them about what those studies can and cannot accomplish.

Because the company is forthcoming regarding every study, "The media know we're always going to be there with it That takes some of the sensationalism away. At least I hope so," said Bond.

While cancer will always be a frightening word, the willingness of companies like Monsanto, Dow, and others to discuss study results with employees and the media has proved to company officials that honesty is the best policy.

Many employers fear that mentioning the word "cancer" will alarm employees, and cause panic, anger, and mistrust. Dow and Monsanto have found that the opposite is true. Employees feel that their employers are truly lookin out for their health and well-being.

"There's no doubt about it. Openness has really paid dividends for us," said Bond.

DSW 134167