

NIOSH Activities--Women in the Workplace

May 12, 1976

NIOSH activities can be summarized under the following topics:

I. Focusing Attention on the Problem:

In the past, much of the attention relating to protecting the health of women, especially the pregnant woman and the fetus, has centered around nonoccupational hazards, e.g., drugs, infectious diseases, smoking, etc. NIOSH has taken the lead in emphasizing the potential hazards associated with occupational exposures and the complex social, legal, and health issues that must be resolved by:

- (1) Discussing with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission the scope of the potential health problems and their implications regarding equal employment opportunities.
- (2) Discussing with other Federal agencies involved in research on --- mutagenesis, teratogenesis, and transplacental carcinogenesis, e.g., FDA, NICH&HD, and NCI to sensitize the scientific community to the need for a focused attention on the problem.
- (3) Assembling representatives of organized labor, management, EEOC, and Government health agencies in a round table discussion of the complex issues involved by using exposures to vinyl chloride as an example.
- (4) Informal contacts with various labor, management, and scientific groups pointing out the priority that must be given to this issue now and in the future.

II. Identifying the Potential Occupational Hazards to Pregnant Women:

- (1) Publishing in the NIOSH Registry of Toxic Effects of Chemical Substances those agents which have been shown to be teratogenic or mutagenic by animal experimentation.
- (2) Including in recommended occupational health standards and medical surveillance guidelines to physicians any information which may implicate an agent as a potential human mutagen or teratogen.
- (3) Conducting epidemiologic studies on the relationship of chemical exposures to fetal wastage and malformations and keeping abreast of similar research efforts underway in this and other countries.
- (4) Requesting additional information on chemicals suspected of having mutagenic, teratogenic, or carcinogenic effects through publication in the Federal Registry.

III. Assessing the Current State of Knowledge Regarding Mutagenesis, Teratogenesis, and Transplacental Carcinogenesis, and Future Research Needs

- (1) NIOSH is conducting a review of the current state of knowledge of the above effects as they relate to the working woman. Representatives from CDC, NICH&HD, NCI, and NIEHS are undertaking this review. This group has been asked to make recommendations based on the current state of scientific knowledge, for the protection of the fertile female and her offspring and how this may differ from the protection of the male worker. They will also be asked to consider future research needs.
- (2) NIOSH-CDC is supporting a national conference on women in the workplace to be held at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D. C. June 17-20, 1976. Health, legal, and social issues will be discussed by experts in these areas.

IV. Controlling Workplace Exposures

- (1) The potential hazards to women and their offspring have been included as a special consideration in the recommendation for OSHA standards, e.g., the NIOSH recommendations for a lead standard. This will be required for all future recommended standards also.
- (2) Since occupational carcinogens are suspected also of having mutagenic effects, the NIOSH policy of "no detectable levels of exposures" will, we believe, also offer a degree of protection to the pregnant woman and the developing fetus.
- (3) By informing the employer and physicians through recommended standards that specific agents have caused cancer, birth defects or fetal wastage via animal experiments, the possible human effects hopefully will cause control of exposures to levels below the present standards to protect against legal liability.
- (4) NIOSH is in the process of having developed guidelines for physicians on occupational health as it reflects to the special problems of women, especially during pregnancy.