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Cancer link studied

High incidence reported at Mobil plant

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WASHINGTON — An unfinished study of 92 workers at a South Jersey chemical plant indicates that polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a family of widely used industrial chemicals, may cause a lethal form of skin cancer.

Dr. Anita K. Bahn of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine has found an unusual number of cases of malignant melinoma (a form of skin cancer) and cancer of the pancreas among workers and researchers who were exposed to PCBs more than 20 years ago at a Mobil Oil Co. plant and laboratory in Paulsboro, on the Delaware River below Camden. Two of the workers have died from the cancer.

Researchers discovered eight cancers in seven of the 92 workers exposed to PCBs. There have been three cases of malignant melanoma, and two cases of cancer of the pancreas — significantly more than would be expected in a group of 92 workers.

However, Dr. Bahn said, it is impossible to link PCBs to pancreatic cancer, because other chemicals have been found to cause cancer of the pancreas and because most of the workers in the study were exposed to chemicals other than PCBs.

In addition to the skin and pancreas cancers, one worker developed cancer in the bone and cartilage of his right thigh, another developed cancer in the lower part of the colon, and a third developed multiple myeloma, a cancer of the cells that produce antibodies to combat infections.

Another 37 workers were exposed to the PCBs but their medical records were incomplete.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimates that 12,000 American workers are exposed to the chemicals, and thousands more may come in contact with PCBs while rebuilding or servicing electrical transformers and capacitors. PCBs belong to a family of chemicals called halogenated hydrocarbons. They are related to the outlawed pesticides DDT, aldrin, and dieldrin, all of which have been linked to cancer. Because they are extraordinarily resistant to heat and to chemical and physical stresses, PCBs

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have been widely used in electrical equipment, paints, and plastics.

Prior research has linked PCBs to liver cancer in rats and to a number of skin ailments, including chloracne and dermatitis. Though the Mobil study provides the first evidence that PCBs can cause cancer in humans, the evidence from the Paulsboro plant is limited.

Study turned down

Mobile rejected a proposal by University of Pennsylvania scientists for a more complete study of its workers, saying the evidence did not warrant the expense, an estimated $500,000.

"I think they made a stupid decision," said one doctor. A Mobil spokesman said the company is trying to locate past and present employees who may have been exposed to the PCBs to tell them of the possible danger and to provide medical examinations.

Mobil first noted the unusual incidence of skin and pancreas cancer in its own medical records and asked Dr. Bahn, a cancer epidemiologist, to investigate. On June 24, the company also notified the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health of its suspicions.

Dr. Bahn reported her findings in a letter to the editor of the New England Journal of Medicine. The letter, which notes that PCBs may be a new carcinogenic hazard, never mentions Mobil by name and emphasizes that the study is still in progress. It was published in the Aug. 19 issue of the journal.

"I think the company is to be commended for studying this and for putting it," Dr. Bahn said in a telephone interview yesterday.

Look like moles

Dr. John J. Leyden, a dermatologist at the University of Pennsylvania, said malignant melanoma, the skin cancer now linked to PCBs is extremely difficult to detect, especially in its early stages, when it looks like "run-of-the-mill moles."

Leyden said malignant melanoma often can be cured if it is detected early. But unlike most other skin cancers, it can spread downward to other tissues and it can be fatal, he said in a telephone interview yesterday.

"It is a very vicious tumor," he said.

Mobil never manufactured PCBs, but purchased them for use in laboratory experiments and in manufacturing a catalyst for its refineries, a company spokesman said. The chemicals were used in manufacturing for only three years, 1954-1957, and in laboratory experiments for eight years, beginning in 1949.

Nevertheless, it generally takes cancer 20 years or more to develop in the human body, and only now are links between the disease and possible chemical hazards — including PCBs — beginning to surface.

The Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co., the nation's sole manufacturer of PCBs, has produced 709 million pounds of the chemicals since 1929, most of it at a plant in Sauget, Ill. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that there are 300 million pounds of PCBs now in use in the United States, another 290 million pounds in landfills and dumps, 100 million pounds polluting the air and water, and 100 million pounds which have degraded.

4 N.J. plants

Four New Jersey companies are among three on federal lists of plants using PCBs to make electrical equipment. The four are Federal Pacific Electric Co. and Wagner Electric Co. in Newark, Research-Cottrell Co. in Flanders, and Universal Manufacturing Corp. in Totowa.

Spokesmen for two of the companies, Federal Pacific and Universal Manufacturing, said none of their employees had reported any kinds of diseases from contact with PCBs. Spokesmen from the other two companies were not available for comment.

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