Friday, September 3, 1976 Metro

Monsanto PCB workers clear of cancers, reports company

No cases have been found of malignant melanoma or pancreatic cancer among current or former employes engaged in producing polycholorinated biphenyls (PCB) at the Monsanto Co. William G. Krummrich Plant in Sauget, the company reported today.

Dr. George Roush, Monsanto director of medical and environmental health was responding to questions raised as a result of a recent Mobil Oil Corp. study that reported finding three cases of melanoma, a skin disease, or pancreatic cancer among 72 employes exposed at a PCB product while working at a Mobil plant in New Jersey.

PCB is used mostly as an insulating fluid in electrical equipment. Last January, Monsanto started to phase out its production, all of which is at the Sauget plant, because of increasing environmental concern. A company spokesman today said Monsanto will voluntarily cease all production as soon as possible, consistent with the ability of transformer and capacitor manufacturers to convert to an alternate fluid.

Dr. Roush said that if either melanoma or pancreatic cancer were related to PCB exposure, as the Mobil report suggested, the malignancies also would have been noted among workers producing the chemical.

"In any opinion, the fact that we have found no cases of either of these cancers casts strong doubt that the findings of the Mobil study were in fact related to PCB," Dr. Roush said.

The Monsanto information is based on a review of the records of more than 300 current and former employes in the PCB production unit of the Sauget plant dating back to 1936 when the unit was started. Within that group Monsanto has been able to identify 50 former employes who died. The death certificates have been reviewed.

Information was obtained from an ongoing Monsanto epidemiological study that will require another 12 to 18 months to complete. Much additional work needs to be done before a final assessment can be made.

With the qualification that it is not a final assessment and much more study remains, Dr. Roush said a singificant excess of cancer was not shown in the review of the death certificates. He said, however, that the incidence of lung cancer among deceased former employes who worked in the PCB unit during any part of their Monsanto employment was higher than the rate for the general United States population.

Covering a 25-year period, seven cases of lung cancer were found among the 50 death certificates compard with 2.7 that could have been expected among the country's male population. There have been no reports to indicate PCB lung cancer deaths.

Dr. Rouch said there could be no firm conclusions from "this raw information," explaining that it has not been studied from the angle of the ages of the people involved.

"The findings to date may be significant and they may well not be," Dr. Roush said. "What we need now is a controlled study of the lung cancer cases.

"For example, and while it may be difficult to reconstruct, we hope to determine the smoking habits of these workers and, if possible their prior and post Monsanto work experience and exposure. We would also hope to compare this incidence of lung cancer with the lung mortality rate for the East St. Louis area. We do know that three of the seven workers who died of lung cancer worked in the PCB unit for less than three months."

Rousch said another tentative finding was that PCB workers lived longer than the national average.

To date, the study indicates that the cases of lung cancer were not related with PCB, Dr. Roush said. He added that Monsanto's extensive long-term feeding studies with animals also indicates that PCB does not tend to produce cancer.

Monsanto officials says the study will be presented to federal agencies and published when completed.

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