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Safe vinyl-chloride level: billion-dollar question?

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A few years ago some rats in a research laboratory in Italy contracted a rare form of cancer.

A few months ago the public first heard of the mysterious deaths of a few workers at a Louisville chemical plant of the same disease.

Today, investigators throughout the world are beginning to put together evidence that the link between the two incidents — exposure to the common chemical vinyl chloride and a slow death from a rare cancer of the liver — may be an international health menace of monumental proportions.

Tomorrow in Washington, a series of hearings will begin to determine what the United States government intends to do about it.

Specifically, the U.S. Labor Department has been asked by two government health agencies to forbid the exposure of chemical workers to any detectable trace of vinyl chloride, a basic chemical that in gaseous form is used to produce many types of plastics.

Meanwhile, the workers are laboring under an "emergency" standard forbidding exposure to more than 50 parts of the gas per million parts of air, one-tenth the standard in force before it was commonly suspected that vinyl chloride might be a killer.

background

However, the outcome of the hearings may well be felt by far more than the 8,000 workers in the multimillion-dollar vinyl chloride industry, because in recent weeks and days there have been reports of deaths from the same mysterious cancer among employees in the plastics industry.

Indeed, the circle of concern has broadened beyond the plastics industry, with its hundreds of thousands of workers. For now there are documented cases of the

cancer, called angiosarcoma, among people whose only connection with the chemical and plastics industries is that they happen to have lived near plants where the chemical was processed.

The known worldwide death count from angiosarcoma induced by exposure to vinyl chloride now stands at 10, five of which involved workers at the Louisville plant on Bella Lane of the B. F. Goodrich Co. And, two more persons, both employees of the Louisville Goodrich plant are known to be suffering from the usually fatal disease.

Public health officials already have

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Hearings to begin

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oved to recommend that vinyl chloride no longer be used as an aerosol propellant, a move that had begun independently among some of the nation's largest manufacturers of household and garden spray.

And the vinyl chloride industry has begun to take a variety of well publicized steps to substantially cut back on workers' exposure to the chemical. The steps include new cleaning procedures, use of respiratory equipment, better ventilation and, like some firms acted quietly a while ago, to lessen exposure, and at least one firm, the Dow Chemical Co., moved to reduce worker exposure to vinyl chloride in the early 1960s.

However, despite tests over the past 22 decades and considerably increased search over the past half-dozen years, the basic question apparently remains unanswered: How much exposure to vinyl chloride is safe?

In interviews conducted over the past 18 months by Louisville Times reporter, no expert — in the industry, in research circles, in medical institutions or government — has been able to offer a definitive answer to that question.

Now, over the next several days, more than 80 persons representing industry, government, labor, consumers, medicine and research scientists will in prepared statements and speeches, present their views before the Labor Department group charged with the responsibility of setting safe worker-exposure standards.

While the public concern with what they determine is relatively new — brought on by the newly reported deaths and the publicity surrounding them — the private concern with the vinyl-chloride or plastic peril is much older.

The scientific and medical journals of the past 25 years are spotted with reports implicating a possible link between exposure to vinyl chloride and disease. Workers for years have been talking non-stop themselves about their own mysterious ailments and those of their colleagues.

And the chemical and plastics industries have been quietly and privately discussing the possibly unhealthy implications of vinyl-chloride production for at least a year and a half.

In late 1972, the leading industry

group, the Manufacturing Chemists Association, learned of an Italian researcher who had discovered that a group of his laboratory rats had contracted angiosarcoma, apparently because of their exposure to vinyl chloride. The association told its members, including R. F. Goodrich, of the research at a special meeting in January last year.

The problem of doing something with this new knowledge, however, is not a simple one.

As labor, consumer advocates, and some medical and scientific authorities will argue this week, a near-zero level of exposure is technologically attainable and, under the circumstances, necessary to safeguard health. However, as the industry will note, that level cannot be obtained without immense costs for new equipment and monitoring techniques, and the public may not want or be able to pay the price for plastics if those millions and even billions of dollars are spent.

This week the public will, through the media, learn a lot more about the arguments for and against stricter safeguards against long-term exposure to vinyl chloride. For at least 21 persons, however, it will be too late to learn about the danger.

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