

Senators told controls needed on use of toxic substances

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WASHINGTON — Witnesses at a Senate hearing here yesterday cited the recently discovered dangers of vinyl chloride, the cancer-causing chemical first identified in Louisville, as "the perfect example" of the need for a toxic-substances control bill to keep harmful products out of the marketplace.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, a noted authority on occupational health research, told the Senate Commerce subcommittee on the environment that vinyl chloride may cause bodily mutation, as well as cause several cancers besides the rare liver disease first uncovered at the B. F. Goodrich plastics plant in Louisville. Six persons who have worked at the plant have died of the disease.

The hastily arranged hearings yesterday coincide with the resumption of long-dormant House-Senate conference meetings on a toxic-substances bill that passed both houses last summer.

Sen. John Tunney, D-Calif., a strong backer of the bill and the only senator present for the daylong testimony yesterday, asked Selikoff if it was outrageous the case to say that chemicals that altered gene structure threatened the human race.

The Mount Sinai (N.Y.) School of Medicine doctor replied quickly, "No, the future of the next generation is in our hands."

The testimony yesterday dwelt on the current controversy over the dangers of vinyl chloride, a basic building block of the modern plastics industry. But Selikoff and several of the other witnesses had appeared before the committee before to argue the need for the toxic-substances bill.

"The preventions of the cancers of the year 2000 have to begin now," Selikoff said.

"I don't mind coming back time and again to testify," he said in a brief interview after his testimony. "Passage of that bill would focus public attention on a great problem."

If there had been such a law to screen vinyl chloride before it was marketed, he added, "I can state unequivocally that we could have detected its toxicity (poisonous qualities) and carcinogenicity (its tendency to produce cancer)."

Other speakers representing the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Cancer Institute, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and a chemical workers' union also urged passage of the bill.

Until the conference met Monday, it had been more than 10 months since the

last meeting to discuss differences in the House and Senate versions of the bill. Under the bill, industry itself would be required to make pre-market tests of its products and if the EPA considered them harmful to humans or the environment, they could be banned before commercial production.

At present it's up to industry—such as the B. F. Goodrich announcement of the vinyl-chloride deaths at its Louisville plant—to take the lead.

Government agencies have been left to react to crisis situations. For instance, a Food and Drug Administration official at the hearings yesterday said that his agency didn't even know vinyl chloride was being used commonly as a propellant in hair sprays.

There were several instances yesterday where past industry actions were criticized. Sen. Tunney said he found it "incredible" that the plastics industry kept from government authorities for a year his knowledge that vinyl chloride caused liver cancer in rats in Italian medical experiments.

Theodore R. Torkelson, a research toxicologist for the Dow Chemical Co. and head of the Manufacturing Chemists Association's (MCA's) vinyl-chloride monitoring team, said only that he was "surprised" that the MCA hadn't told the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) about the findings earlier.

Tunney said: "If I were a worker in a polyvinyl chloride plant that year would have made a difference to me."

Dr. Marcus Key, director of NIOSH, said that when his researchers met with the industry chemists in the summer of 1973, "they presented to us, uh, well we did not get the specifics of their studies."

No mention of the liver-cancer findings was made at that time, he said. "If it had been, we would have taken an entirely different course of action because of the widespread use of the material."

The polyvinyl chloride plastic made from vinyl chloride is used in an abundance of products, from plastic pipes to phonograph records and food packaging.

Another NIOSH official, Dr. Joseph K. Wagoner, director of the institute's field studies, released information yesterday showing a much greater incidence of cancer among vinyl-chloride workers than an earlier industry study.

He said the government study showed an overall mortality risk "at variance

with the industry study. This was probably because the manufacturers' study used a "disproportionate number of recently hired employees," he said.

The NIOSH data showed a 57 per cent increase in cancer deaths among the polyvinyl-chloride workers studied beyond what would have been expected. And though the number of deaths from liver cancer was 12 times the number expected, there was also "excess cancer mortality" in other organs including the respiratory system, the blood-forming tissues and the brain and central nervous system, Wagoner said.

In rebuttal to the mostly anti-vinyl-chloride witnesses, Ralph L. Harding Jr., president of the Society of the Plastics Industry, repeated the industry's predictions of economic disaster and plant shutdowns if stringent proposed regulations on exposure to the chemical are imposed.

He said that polyvinyl chloride is "an ubiquitous and critically important material in the industrial and consumer sectors of our economy." And though he said there seems to be no dispute at this time that vinyl chloride produces cancer in both man and animals he urged caution by lawmakers.

Harding said the industry could live with the House version of the proposed toxic-substances control bill, and asked the committee to make laws that fit Aristotle's words that "law is reason free of passion."

A Senate committee aide said after the day's hearings that Tunney was very concerned about a crucial difference in the two bills now in conference.

The Senate bill, considered the stronger by lobbyists for and against it, calls for industry to notify the EPA of all new products it markets, in addition to pre-market testing of certain ones deemed potentially hazardous. There is no such notification provision in the House bill.

Researchers have pointed out that vinyl chloride might not have been caught by pre-market screening because its chemical formula is not suspicious. But the notification clause would have shown it was to be widely produced and would have alerted the enforcing agency to check it more closely, the aide said.

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