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CHAMBERLAIN: Clear thinking can keep us from throwing the baby out with the vinyl chloride.

THESE DAYS

BY JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

CONFRONTATION IN THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY

We live in the midst of many fears. The trouble is that we have no means of knowing in advance just how many of these fears are misplaced.

Yesterday it was cyclamates that were going to do us in. But today cyclamates have been given a reasonably clean bill of health. So it has been with cranberries. But other presumed perils arise.

The sudden publication by the B.F. Goodrich Co. of news that four workers at its Louisville, Ky., vinyl chloride conversion plant had died from a rare form of liver cancer called angiosarcoma now has workers in other chemical plants around the country lining up for diagnostic tests. The question is, will the new fear pass with the assurance that the chemical industry will accept a standard of 50 parts per million exposure level to the gas that is used to make solid polyvinyl chloride? (Such is the standard accepted in Britain.) Or will the Naderites, who don't believe that the industry ever has a case, insist on killing the entire polyvinyl chloride business by demanding a "zero exposure" safety standard, which cannot in the nature of things be guaranteed?

Open Concern

Whatever one may say, the industry itself cannot be accused of cover-up practices. The B.F. Goodrich Chemical Company has led the way in making investigations designed to establish tolerable exposure limits. In the early days of vinyl chloride conversion to the polyvinyl plastic solid that is used in a myriad of industrial products, nobody worried about the sweet-smelling gas that lingered in the plants. Since it takes 15 years and more for an angiosarcoma tumor to develop, it is important to know whether the 20 or so cases of liver cancer that have been identified as originating from vinyl chloride exposure date back to a dark age of the plastics industry that has already passed away.

The trouble is that adversary proceedings in which the advocates of extreme positions face each other in Washington will not necessarily lead to a scientific settlement. In Europe, accredited technicians set standards without indulging in passionate arguments and incriminations. But in the U.S., opposing value systems clash, and the scare headlines make it seem that heroes are contending with villains, with industry invariably getting the worst of it.

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Marginal Notes

Despite the Naderites, however, the general public has a special interest in a scientific determination of tolerable safety margins. Some 6,500 U.S. workers now work in plants that turn vinyl chloride gas into a solid plastic. Economically speaking, if 6,500 workers were forced to seek other employment it would cause no great crisis. But 700,000 workers are needed to make finished plastic products out of the raw polyvinyl material. And a grand total of 2.2 million workers throughout the U.S. economy have jobs that can be traced to the use of polyvinyl products.

Ticking these products off is an almost endless job. The pipe now in most frequent use for plumbing is a polyvinyl pipe. The tile in your shower bath, the cover on your automobile seat, the tubing used for electric milking machines that give you relatively cheap dairy products, the clear wrapping in which bacon and other meats are sold, the phonograph records that bring you music, and the safe insulation around copper wiring that enables you to electrify your house at a minimum of expense, are all fashioned out of polyvinyl chloride. Even the respiratory equipment used by doctors comes from polyvinyl plastic; the medical supplies made out of the stuff have surely saved more lives than have been lost by exposure to the raw vinyl chloride gas.

If polyvinyl plastic were to be replaced by a natural product, the whole of continental Europe would have to be turned over to sheep raising for industrial fabrics. The paper industry, even now suffering from shortages, would be unable to cope with the demands for wrapping derived from forest products.

Nevertheless, even though 2.2 million jobs are dependent on polyvinyl plastic, it is crass to use economics to make a case for the industry. The safe limit of vinyl gas control must be found. August 25 is the cut-off date for the submission of evidence in Washington. October 5 is the date set for the final decision about the safety margin. What we need is a lot of light and no heat when the ultimate judgment is made.

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