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Opinion

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Too high a price for safety on the job?

THE PROPOSED new rules on exposure of chemical workers to vinyl chloride gas bring into sharp focus one of the most perplexing questions facing America: How much risk to human life and health are we willing to take for the jobs and consumer conveniences provided by industry? The key word is "risk."

The evidence to date suggests overwhelmingly that the old federal safety rules limiting exposure to 500 parts of vinyl chloride in one million parts of air were too loose. Nineteen known cases of what had been considered a rare form of liver cancer have now been reported among vinyl chloride workers in this country (seven of them in Louisville) and elsewhere.

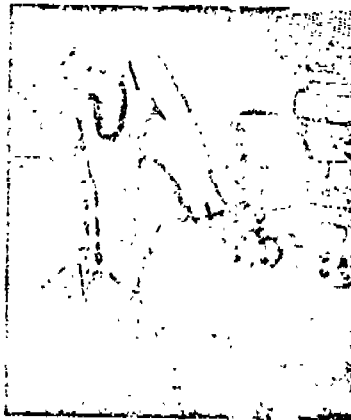
Emergency rules limiting exposure to 50 parts per million were hastily put into effect when the liver cancer hazard became apparent. Now the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) proposes to require that no detectable levels of vinyl chloride gas be permitted in areas where workers may be exposed. Meanwhile, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has become concerned about the possible hazards of the gas in the atmosphere of areas around vinyl chloride plants.

The new OSHA standards, if they were successfully implemented by the industry, doubtless would end the threat to workers' safety. But three factors must be considered: (1) Chemical industry spokesmen claim that it will be prohibitively costly and/or technologically impossible to meet the new standards, especially if they become effective in July, as is now proposed. (2) Vinyl chloride is a basic material in the production of plastics used in a wide range of consumer goods and in packaging. And (3), although laboratory tests with rats suggest that exposure to 50 parts vinyl chloride per million of air, as permitted under the present emergency regulations, may be dangerous, there is no documented research so far to suggest that exposure to lower levels—10 parts per million, for example—is hazardous.

Threat to older plants

The claims of the vinyl chloride industry, of course, can be considered self-serving. But that doesn't mean they are invalid. Meeting the proposed OSHA standard of "no detectable levels" in plant areas where workers may be exposed almost surely will add significantly to production costs. And it may prove to be technologically impossible, especially at such older vinyl chloride plants as the H. F. Goodrich Company facility in Louisville, to conform with the proposed regulations.

The industry, nevertheless, cannot be allowed indefinitely to postpone steps which will protect both its workers and persons who live near its plants. A July deadline for reducing vinyl chloride to "no detectable levels" within and around its plants may be unreasonable, but clearly OSHA must continue to apply



A Goodrich plant worker emerges from a vinyl polymerization vat

pressure, and the industry just as clearly must show a good faith effort to eliminate the hazards.

OSHA, the industry and the public must face the fact that the proposed rules could force the industry to close some plants and might increase production costs so sharply that the use of plastics made from vinyl chloride would be discouraged. This, in turn, leads to the second point—the use of vinyl chloride end-products by many other industries. If the new OSHA rules force a sharp decline in vinyl chloride production, this impact could spread like ripples in a pond to other segments of the country's closely interrelated and interdependent industrial economy. Products ranging from plastic squeeze bottles to home appliances could become more expensive or simply unavailable, and jobs could be lost.

The vinyl chloride industry doubtless will make these points next month at a public hearing on the proposed OSHA rules. And industry spokesmen just as surely will argue that OSHA is overreacting to the admittedly serious liver cancer hazard, and that compromise standards should be tried.

Compromise standards, of course, involve risks. Human risk is an inescapable factor in most industrial processes, yet it is a factor that must be minimized. Underground coal mining, for example, is an occupation which almost certainly will always be more hazardous, unless it can one day be totally automated, than working on an automobile assembly line. It is also, however, an industry which is essential to the American economy and the present American lifestyle, both of which consume enormous energy.

The essential nature of the industry, however, means that the added cost of making underground mining reasonably safe can be passed on to the consuming public—unless the country is willing to pay the environmental cost of depending entirely on strip-mining for its coal.

One can argue, of course, that plastics made from vinyl chloride, unlike the energy provided by coal, are a frivolous and essentially "phony" part of the American economy and culture—something, in other words, we could do without and perhaps be better off for the deprivation.

This again, however, involves broad public preferences—the same kind of choices we face in balancing clean air against automobile production, or insect-free crops against the long-term harm of DDT and some other pesticides to our environment. It also involves jobs. No worker wants to be exposed to hazards on the job. But neither do most workers want their jobs eliminated along with the hazards.

OSHA's biggest challenge

The vinyl chloride case is only one of thousands in which OSHA, set up under a 1970 congressional act, has butted heads with industry. These clashes have been frequent and painful enough to prompt moves in Congress—including an unsuccessful effort last week—to clip OSHA's wings and to soften the alleged severity of the agency's rulings.

Perhaps, as some supporters of OSHA argue, these moves were hatched in corporate board rooms. And perhaps most industrial executives, while grumbling about "arbitrary" rulings by OSHA, actually are finding that the agency's standards can be met at increased but reasonable cost.

But the vinyl chloride case appears to present the biggest and most frightening challenge OSHA has encountered in its brief history. Ultimately, it is a challenge not just to a federal bureaucracy, but to the American people.

After next month's public hearing, it should be clearer whether OSHA is meeting or exceeding its congressional mandate. But only if voters insist that occupational safety become an issue in this year's congressional elections will it become clear whether or not the congressional mandate is also the people's.

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