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HIGHLIGHTS OF CURRENT REPORT

AN INTERAGENCY AGREEMENT between the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health is signed for "consultation, coordination, and cooperation" between the two agencies. The agreement outlines several areas, such as training, health hazard evaluations, criteria documents, standards, and other efforts, in which the agencies intend to share information and technical expertise (p. 1673).

OSHA ALSO AGREES with the Mine Safety and Health Administration on coordination of effort. The two agencies enter into an agreement to eliminate overlapping jurisdiction and Labor Secretary Ray Marshall says that, while mine sites and milling operations come under the jurisdiction of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act will apply in those special instances where provisions of the Mine Act do not cover or otherwise apply to job safety and health hazards on mine or mill sites, such as hospitals on mine sites (p. 1673).

OSHA'S COMPLIANCE POLICY of making inspections for virtually all complaints about workplace hazards interferes with its policy of directing its limited resources on workplaces that pose the greatest risk to workers, the General Accounting Office reports to Congress. The GAO says most complaints are from the types of businesses that OSHA would not visit on its own initiative and do not appear to address serious hazards or, in some cases, any hazards. The watchdog agency suggests that OSHA could make better use of its inspection resources (p. 1674).

INDUSTRY AND GOVERNMENT officials investigating a suspected high incidence of brain cancer at two Texas chemical plants expect to receive within five weeks an accurate history of all primary brain cancer cases within a three-

county area near the plants. The investigation is being conducted to determine whether there is an unusually high incidence of a rare form of brain cancer, glioblastoma multiform, in the Texas City, Tex., area (p. 1675).

TIMOTHY F. CLEARY, chairman of the Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission, tells a Senate committee that the commission is "working diligently to reduce" a backlog of 402 cases. The chairman testifies during confirmation hearings on his nomination to a second term at the commission that OSAHRC's backlog represents a "primary concern" to the commissioners (p. 1676).

THE LABOR DEPARTMENT DEFENDS the role of Assistant Labor Secretary Eula Bingham in decisionmaking on the lead standard. In response to a lead industry memorandum to a federal appeals court charging Bingham with bias, the agency says a speech by Bingham last fall did not amount to prejudicial conduct on her part in developing the lead standard because all decisions involving the rule were final before the speech (p. 1676).

ORGANOPHOSPHORUS ESTERS exposure of workers will be studied by NIOSH, which notes that many organophosphorus pesticides are known to be neurotoxins, but little is known about the health effects of exposure to other organophosphorus compounds (p. 1679).

THE REFERENCE FILE SUPPLEMENT with this week's OSHR includes two new Occupational Safety and Health Administration program directives, revisions in the lead standard to denote provisions affected by a judicial stay, amendments to the OSHA Field Operations Manual chapter on state jurisdiction and state plans, and updated versions of the guides to compliance for the Michigan and New Mexico plans.

Congress Should Amend the Act

GAO argued that Congress should amend Section 8(f) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act to give OSHA authority to resolve formal complaints without making inspections at the workplaces unless the complaints involve potential hazards that can cause death or serious physical harm. GAO's proposed amendment would require the Labor Department to notify the employer of the complaint, when it has determined that the complaint is not of a serious nature, and to require the employer to report on corrective actions taken. The Labor Department also would notify the complainant in writing of the employer's actions, according to GAO's proposal (Reference File, 71:1106).

Comments on GAO's Recommendations

GAO was told by OSHA that it is developing instructions prohibiting inspections for complaints that describe no violation of an OSHA standard or no potentially harmful condition. OSHA also said that an existing program directive (200-69) provides area directors with the option of responding to nonfatal other-than-serious complaints with a letter to the employer (Current Report, December 15, 1977, p. 984). OSHA added that it is considering several options, which it did not describe for GAO, for alleviating the complaint problem while continuing to protect workers.

But GAO argued that Program Directive 200-69 "does not provide the flexibility needed for handling complaints by means other than an inspection. Until OSHA develops a more effective approach to resolving informal complaints considered less than serious without workplace inspections, such complaints will continue to use a disproportionate amount of time and resources."

OSHA also told GAO that it requires full inspections, time and resources permitting, for all complaints classified as serious and that it is considering a requirement that complaint inspections in high-hazard industries include all high-hazard conditions.

Report is Available

Single copies of the report, "How Effective Are OSHA's Complaint Procedures?" (HRD-79-48), are available without charge from the General Accounting Office, Distribution Section, Room 1518, 441 G St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20548. Additional copies are available for \$1 each from the GAO, Distribution Section, P.O. Box 1020, Washington, D.C., 20013.

Health Hazards

INDUSTRY, GOVERNMENT COLLECTING DATA TO MATCH WORK HISTORIES, CANCER CASES

Government and industry officials investigating a suspected high incidence of brain cancer at two Texas chemical plants expect to receive within five weeks an accurate history of all primary brain cancer cases within a three-county area near the plants.

Completion of the list is an early step in the investigation which was begun in mid-February by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and Union Carbide Corporation (Current Report, March 8, p. 1521).

The investigation is being conducted to determine whether there is an unusually high incidence of a rare form of brain cancer, glioblastoma multiform, in the Texas City, Tex., area. Ten reported deaths among Union Carbide employees, and a smaller number at a nearby Monsanto Company plant, represent "triple the number of deaths due to a primary brain tumor than would be expected" in a population the size

of the companies involved, according to a Union Carbide letter to employees.

Much of the information about the cancers has been gathered from Union Carbide's own employee records. Investigators, however, also are using the resources of the MD Anderson Hospital and Tumor Center of the University of Texas Medical Center.

The hospital maintains a cancer register which includes information on cancer deaths for the entire state of Texas dating from the early 1950's. Hospital personnel now are preparing a list of all primary brain cancer cases in Galveston, Brazoria, and Harris counties, the three counties where 99 percent of Union Carbide's employees live.

In addition to the MD Anderson list, NIOSH and company officials April 9 began collecting extensive demographic data on the 8,000 former and present employees at Union Carbide's vast chemicals and plastics plant in Texas City. The information, including data on work history, is being coded for transfer to NIOSH for eventual comparison with overall data on cancer death rates.

By searching Union Carbide records, and cross-referencing with the MD Anderson cancer register, investigators hope to identify all cases of cancer among the employee population, including any cases of glioblastoma multiform not already identified.

Officials are conducting the massive search to supplement Union Carbide's earlier findings of ten cases of glioblastoma multiform, discovered by searching through 451 death certificates of Union Carbide employees who died while working for the company or while receiving a company pension.

Investigators are attempting to learn if there are other cases of brain cancer among the nearly 8,000 persons who worked at the plant at some time since it opened in 1941.

Reports of brain cancer cases at other chemical plants in the area will be investigated if necessary, according to a government official, who added that there is not a "suspicious number" of cases at any other facility at this time.

Preliminary Analysis

Preliminary analysis of the work histories of employees who reportedly died from brain tumors indicated no common job assignment or exposure. Union Carbide reported to employees early in the investigation.

In particular, there was no common exposure to vinyl chloride, a chemical which has been linked to glioblastoma multiform in animals and humans, among employees who suffered from the cancer.

Company officials reported that vinyl chloride was manufactured at the plant from 1948 to 1969; a time when there was little knowledge about its harmful health effects, and no federal regulation of the substance. Industry officials cite the testing of vinyl chloride in the 1950s for possible use as an anesthetic gas as an example of the lack of knowledge of possible harmful or carcinogenic effects.

Vinyl chloride production at the plant was stopped in 1969, but use continued, although company officials report less vinyl chloride was used in 1978 than in any year since 1958.

Legal Action Taken

At least two lawsuits have been filed by families of brain cancer victims against Union Carbide since the investigation began.

However, government and industry spokesmen are not commenting on the cases other than to say it is uncertain whether the victims named in the lawsuits were afflicted with glioblastoma multiform or another type of cancer. Officials also said they doubted whether any legal action can be taken until the investigation is complete.