

THE INSIDE STORY

April 1981



Union Carbide tank at the Freeport refinery.

Texas suffers the cancer of prosperity

By John Judis

TEXAS CITY, TEXAS

The Gulf Coast area around Houston, which includes Freeport, Galveston, Texas City, Beaumont and Port Arthur, is one of the fastest-growing and most prosperous in the country. Companies advertise on the radio for scarce workers. The cable TV channels, which run stock quotations or weather forecasts in the North, here broadcast a constant stream of job opportunities.

The Houston area's prosperity is built primarily on oil and the petrochemical industry. The Houston skyline is dotted with oil company skyscrapers. Many of the companies that make drilling equipment are located around Houston. And the Houston port cities are the center for the country's petrochemical industry. Dow's largest U.S. plant is at Freeport. AMOCO and Union Carbide are in Texas City. Texas is in Beaumont, and Gulf Oil is in Port Arthur.

But as New Jersey residents learned long ago, there is one important drawback to prosperity based on petrochemicals: a cancer rate that approaches epidemic proportions. The Gulf Coast has now pulled even with the worst parts of New Jersey. And the alarming cancer rate among the workers at some petrochemical plants has spurred federal investigations.

Three years ago, a hospital resident in Galveston became concerned when an acquaintance who worked at Union Carbide in Texas City died of glioblastoma, a rare and deadly form of brain cancer. Some time in quiet conversation with other workers at Union Carbide had died of glioblastoma. A complaint to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) prompted an investigation.

Last year, OSHA investigators, led by Dr. Victor Alexander, published a preliminary report: 18 brain cancer deaths had been discovered between 1965 and 1980—about twice the rate in the non-Union Carbide population. While the investigators cited employee contact with 10 known or suspected carcinogens, they were unable to determine which chemical cause

The OSHA study of Union Carbide also discovered another distressing statistic. In comparing the health records of Union Carbide workers with those of other Gulf Coast workers, investigators found an unusual concentration of glioblastomas among Dow Chemical workers in Freeport. According to Dr. Gordon Reeve of the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, the incidence of glioblastoma among Dow workers was about two-and-a-half times normal.

The same results showed up at the AMOCO refinery in Texas City. Workers there, according to Reeve, were run to two-and-a-half times more prone to glioblastoma and about seven or eight times more prone to melanoma, a rare and usually fatal form of skin cancer, than the normal population.

Investigations initiated by the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the Gulf Oil refinery in Port Arthur again mirrored the Texas City-Freeport results: a twice normal incidence of glioblastoma.

Union Carbide has been relatively cooperative with OSHA investigators, who plan to release a fuller report later this spring. But they tend to minimize the cancer threat to their employees. "Epidemiology is a dull tool," plant manager Damon Engel told me. "At the time Dr. Alexander wrote that article, there were huge gaps in its accuracy." But NIOSH's Reeve said that he expected the fuller report would reveal an even greater cancer risk than the preliminary report did.

Engel also downplayed the threat to employee morale. "There has certainly been no panic on the part of our employees," he said. "The longer the employee has been around, the less they are worried, because they believe in the credibility of the company."

But interviews with employees and employee relatives revealed concern that in some cases bordered on panic. One employee, who worked for Union Carbide for most of his life and had spent 15 years in the highly toxic vinyl chloride section of the plant had been literally incapacitated by fear of developing brain tumors and had had to secure early retirement through disability. "It became increasingly difficult for him even to walk by the plant or look at the gate," his son said.

Another employee, a Vietnam veteran who has worked for Union Carbide for 14 years, typified the employee mood, a mixture of fear and resignation. "I worry about it. I worry about it a lot," he said. "We're playing poker with our lives."

"But I try not to dwell on it. You've got to work somewhere. And the money here is pretty good. You just hope you're not the one who catches it."

Several families of Union Carbide workers who have died of glioblastoma in 1978 at the age of 62. Joe Liles worked at Union Carbide for 35 years. "I can't imagine any company dealing with chemicals not testing them before they massaged it on the public," Liles told an interviewer.

Dow's intransigence.

Most often, the hazards of a workplace are not discovered by inquiring physicians (almost never by plant physicians), but by the workers themselves. Dr. Sharon Itaya, the district health director for OCAW, tells the story of an AMOCO worker who in reading the company newspaper discovered that refinery workers were regularly dying at age 55, while executives were dying at an average age of 78.

Once a worker complains, the next step has to be

made by OSHA. But OSHA often meets firm resistance from the companies. Union Carbide is the exception.

Union Carbide, a national authority on plant hazards who works at the University of Texas hospital in Galveston, was employed by Dow until 1977. When a 13-year study that Legator supervised found a high incidence of health risks to Dow workers, Dow called off the study.

An April 1981 article in *Houston City Magazine* by Lee Hochberg chronicles Dow's resistance to any OSHA investigation of its Freeport medical records. Last May, Dow denied an OSHA/NIOSH team access to its records, charging that the investigation might reveal "trade secret information" and threaten employee "privacy and protection of their individual rights."

When Rep. Bob Eckhardt threatened last May to sponsor an investigation of Dow, the company released memoranda of studies that purported to show that "there is nothing...indicating that the number of deaths due to brain cancer in the total work population is above the expected norm for a population of that size."

Nationally, Dow has been a leading opponent of OSHA. It helped set up the American Industrial Health Council (AIHC), chaired by Dow president Paul Oreifice. One AIHC representative, Dr. Francis Roe, testified before OSHA in 1979 that "cancer is probably one of nature's ways of eliminating sexually effective individuals who would otherwise, in nature's view, compete for available food resources without advantage to the species as a whole."

Most Gulf Coast companies follow the Dow pattern. Last January, when an explosion rocked the AMOCO refinery, the company demanded that OSHA investigators secure a search warrant. When they got a warrant the company still refused to let them in.

According to OCAW union officials, many companies try to shortcircuit any employee complaints by raising the specter of plant shutdowns. The companies also employ statistical obfuscation. When OCAW and NCI reported the high cancer rate among Gulf Oil Refinery workers in Port Arthur, the company countered with a study of its own showing no perceptible threat to employees. But the company included the records of white-collar workers, who were not as likely to be exposed to toxic chemicals, in its study of employee risk. The OCAW/NCI study focused on blue-collar workers.

With a change in administration in Washington and with "New Right" protegee Jack Fields having replaced Eckhardt in Congress, there is little chance that much will be done about the Gulf Coast's cancer epidemic.

Ben Bare, the director of the local OSHA office, complained that he previously had only four industrial hygienists to cover a six-county area. "I could see three industrial hygienists," Bare said. "I investigate one-week complaints that the only thing I can do is complaint inspection. I can never do any general inspections. I never go into the plants and identify the problem so that things can be prevented from happening."

Another government official investigating the cancer cases in the Gulf Coast is similarly pessimistic. "I am worried about how we are going to get out work done now," he said. "We had a lot of trouble operating on our old budget. Now there are going to be substantial budget cuts."

Dr. Legator expects that the eventual downturn in the Gulf Coast's industry will also imperil investigations. "As the economy slows, workers are less willing to get involved in health matters," Legator said. "There is more pressure not to say anything. We're headed for difficult times."

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to visit smelters in Hayden, Ariz., El Paso, Texas, Tacoma, Wash., and others. The team includes Michael Wright of the United Steel Workers of America, Michael Varner of ASARCO and Mel Cassidy of OSHA. A circuit court of appeals has remanded the existing arsenic standard to the agency for a risk assessment, while keeping the new standard in effect in the interim. Auchter noted that the team's joint assessment would hopefully determine appropriate control methods to protect arsenic workers.

--Text reprinted

1273/81x Occupational Injuries and Illnesses in 1980. News. U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bur. of Labor Statistics p 1, November 18, 1981.

Job-related injuries and illnesses declined in 1980, the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor reported. About 1 injury or illness occurred for every 12 workers in the private economy during 1980, compared with the ratio of 1 out of 11 in each of the previous 4 years. The latest survey results show that all measures--incidence rates and estimates of number of cases for total private sector industries--fell for the first time in 5 years. The all-industry incidence rate fell from 9.5 injuries and illnesses per 100 full-time workers in 1979 to 8.7 in 1980. About 10 percent of the 0.8 decline in the incidence rate was the result of a decrease in total hours worked between 1979 and 1980. In 1980, work-related deaths in units with 11 or more employees also fell--from 4,950 in 1979 to 4,400 in 1980. The fatality rate fell from 8.6 per 100,000 workers in 1979 to 7.7 in 1980. Over the 2-year period from 1979 to 1980, 30 percent of all occupational fatalities were associated with the operation of cars and trucks. The remainder were from heart attacks; industrial vehicles or equipment; falls; electrocutions; aircraft crashes; struck by objects other than vehicles or equipment; plant machinery operations; gun shots; caught in, under, or between objects; fires; explosions; and gas inhalation.

--Condensed from text

1274/81x Lead Standard Supplemental Statement of Reasons Postponed Again. AQMA Report p 4, November 1981.

For the sixth time, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has deferred the effective date of its supplemental statement of reasons and amendment of the lead standard. Last January, OSHA published in the Federal Register a supplemental statement of reasons assessing the technological and economic feasibility of meeting the permissible exposure level for lead for 46 industries. This supplemental statement, which was originally to have become effective on February 20, has now been deferred until December 10, 1981.

--Text reprinted

1275/81x Union Carbide Tells Employees Results Of Brain Cancer Study. Job Safety & Health Report 11: 179, November 17, 1981.

Workers at Union Carbide's Texas City, Texas petrochemical plant enjoy better than average health, according to a letter the company sent all its workers there. The letter includes results of a Union Carbide investigation begun after a brain cancer scare surfaced last year among chemical workers in Texas. The company's investigation found that the overall minority rate for its Texas City workers since 1941 is significantly less than the national average and that of the 765 deaths among 6,588 workers, 12 were due to primary malignant brain cancer. This rate is slightly higher than the national average, though Carbide said that "no correlation could be found between brain cancer cases and employee exposure to chemicals used or manufactured at the Texas City plant." The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health is also conducting its own probe and has not yet reviewed Union Carbide's report. NIOSH's study with the same data base is now under peer review. Carbide's results follow results of a Dow Chemical study last summer which found no overall increased risk of brain tumors among its Texas workers. Both companies' conclusions mirror each other in that both deny any risk to their employees. Carbide plant manager Damon L. Engle and company doctor Dr. David H. Glenn said in the letter that current company practices provide adequate protection from known health hazards and they predicted that the NIOSH results would "basically agree" with their conclusions. They said that "we have not been able to associate these brain cancer cases with any particular chemical exposure. Second, the types of brain cancer are present in the same percentages as that seen in the general population. Ordinarily, chemically caused cancer is a specific and often unusual type, different than those seen in the general population," Engle and Glenn added. "Finally, excessive brain cancer has not been confirmed in chemical plants similar to ours in other parts of the country."

--Text reprinted

1276/81x Benzidine-, O-Tolidine- and O-Dianisidine-Based Dyes Response to the Interagency Testing Committee. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Fed. Reg. 46: 55004-55006, November 5, 1981.

Action: The Interagency Testing Committee, established under section 4(e) of the Toxic Substances Control Act, designated benzidine-o-tolidine- and o-dianisidine-based dyes for health and environmental effects testing as published in the Federal Register of December 7, 1979 (44 FR 70665). EPA has decided not to pursue sec. 4(e) testing proposals for these chemicals at this time because testing programs which are expected to supply data sufficient for the Agency's needs are being currently planned