Toxins Study Explained

By Robert Morris
Staff Writer

The white-haired man in the front row described how he shoveled the chemical from a fiberglass filtration system at Nitro's Monsanto plant more than 30 years ago. He later had his bladder removed.

Now, he said, "I want to know whether it's damaged my liver."

Another man who had been exposed to the toxic substance said that two of his children weighed four pounds at birth and needed an incubator to survive. He, too, wanted to know if the chemical had anything to do with it.

The answers to these questions might be uncovered in a study next month of between 250 and 300 current and former employees of Monsanto's Nitro plant by the Environmental Sciences Laboratory of New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center.

Coming on the heels of an announcement by Monsanto that it will undertake its own study of men who worked in the production of the chemical 2-4-5-T from 1948 to 1969, the Mount Sinai survey is being conducted under the auspices of the United Steel Workers of America, the bargaining agent for Monsanto workers.

More than 100 current and former Monsanto employees were given details of the Mount Sinai study during a meeting at Nitro Junior High School Thursday. Union officials said it was the beginning of a comprehensive probe into worker exposure to toxic chemicals in the Kanawha Valley.

"We want a report that is accurate, that will tell us the truth," said Paul Rusen, Safety and Health chairman of the USWA's District 23.





Gazette Photos by WILLIAM TIERNAN

One of the the first Monsanto workers to be treated after a 1949 explosion, A.H. Lane, left photo, asks a question of Dr. Marion Moses of Mt. Sinai Medical Center, right photo. Next to Dr. Moses is Mike Wright, United Steel Workers hygienist.

THE UNION IS particularly interested in the dozens of employees who were exposed to dioxin, a highly toxic by-product of trichlorophenol used in the production of 2-4-5-T, in a 1949 explosion at the Nitro plant, officials said.

Some evidence indicates that dioxin may cause liver cancer, nervous disorders, problems with reproductive systems and skin diseases. Many of the workers exposed in the 1949 explosion suffered symptoms of a skin disease called chloracne. Employees also showed symptoms of liver damage, which was not evident until they were tested in 1955, and neuritis or severe pains of muscles in the chest.

Dr. Marion Moses of the Mount Sinai center told the Monsanto employees Thursday that the survey would include not only medical examinations, but gathering of work and medical histories.

Monsanto stopped producing 2-4-5-T in 1969, but Mike Wright, a hygeniest with the Steelworkers, said dioxin is a common byproduct in the manufacture of other chemicals and can be found in many household items, including certain kinds of soap. He said that Dow Chemical is the only company now producing 2-4-5-T.

"Dioxin is probably the most toxic chemical produced by man," Wright said.

Wright said that evidence of the possible health effects of dioxin began to surface during the Vietnam war, when 2-4-5-T was used extensively to destroy jungle cover and force people into populated areas. There were reports of aborted pregnancies and other health problems among Vietnamese villagers.

"EVERYONE AT THAT time dismissed it as war propoganda," he said. However, after the war, servicemen who worked with the chemical also began to report health problems, Wright said.

Concern was furthered when an accident at an Italian plant producing the same chemical forced the evacuation of the town of Seveso in 1976, Wright said. He said 2-4-5-T is still being used in rice production and on cattle grazing land.

Workers attending the meeting were urged to jog their memory to recall each building they had worked in at Monsanto and try to describe how closely they worked with the chemical and some of the processes involved.

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