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Liver cancer strikes a seventh chemical worker

By ANN CRAWFORD

Staff Writer

A seventh case of a newly recognized occupational cancer among vinyl chloride workers has turned up at a Union Carbide Corp. plant in South Charleston, W. Va.

The first six cases of angiosarcoma of the liver, a rare and fatal form of cancer, were at the B. F. Goodrich Chemical Co. plant in Louisville, Ky. Only one of the victims is still alive.

Five chemical plants in New Jersey are known to state officials as converters of vinyl chloride to polyvinyl chloride, the process which appears to be associated with the illness.

Scientists from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health last Wednesday began an intensive scrutiny of eight plants in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky, where the vinyl chloride industry is concentrated.

The team, working under Dr. Joseph K. Wagoner, director of clinical investigations and field studies for the institute, is examining medical and death records of current and former workers.

A decision on whether to send the team to the five New Jersey plants, likely this week or next, will depend on the outcome of the present investigations, according to institute spokesman Richard Wilson. If the surveys in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky pinpoint the cancer cause, additional plant visits will not be necessary, he said.

Researchers hope to learn first if the cancer victims worked with an old form of polyvinyl chloride or with a

10-year-old form with different-shaped crystals.

The answer to that question could eliminate the need to survey some polyvinyl chloride plants. The institute has a list — incomplete as of last week — of 27 U.S. manufacturers of the versatile polymer.

Exposed for 20 years

Most of the known cancer victims had been exposed to vinyl chloride and its chemical offshoots for about 20 years, working first with the old and then with the new form of polyvinyl chloride.

Most were involved in the production stage in which gaseous vinyl chloride is combined with water and a catalyst under pressure to produce polyvinyl chloride, a white crystalline powder.

The powder is a principal ingredient of plastic shower curtains, auto seat covers, and some food wraps. Researchers do not know if workers who make these final products are running exposure risks and doubt that there are hazards for consumers.

The team has a number of other unknowns to juggle:

- A Harvard University researcher suspects another vinyl chloride offshoot — vinylidene — as the cancer

causative agent. Vinylidene appears in the Goodrich process.

- Institute workers in Houston and Cincinnati recently have noted a new ailment called meat wrappers' asthma. It appears among supermarket workers who seal the transparent plastic wrap — made of polyvinyl chloride — in which meat is wrapped.

- A basic dispute among cancer researchers is whether malignancy is caused by prolonged exposure to a cancer-causing agent or by exposure at a critical period.

The liver cancer problem came to light last month when a Goodrich physician expressed concern about what appeared to be related deaths, and the company reported his findings to the institute.

The five New Jersey chemical plants, together employing more than 1,700 workers, are:

- B. F. Goodrich Chemical Co. Division, Pedricktown.
- Hooker Chemical Corp., a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum Corp., Burlington.
- Pantasote Co. of N.Y. Inc., Passaic.
- Tenneco Chemicals Inc., Plastics Division, Burlington.
- Tenneco Chemicals Inc., Intermediates Division, Flemington.

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