

Hazards of the trade

Working can be hazardous to your health. This is growing especially true in the plastics industry. The recent discovery of a rare liver cancer among several workers at a vinyl chloride plant in Kentucky is ominous. Five of those workers died and two more cases have been diagnosed among workers in two other plants that manufacture vinyl chloride, a gas used in making plastic products. Until now, the disease was so rare that the national average was only 21 cases a year. Doctors wonder how many more deaths, attributed to other causes, may actually have been caused by this disease.

Plants that manufacture or use vinyl chloride are being checked for statistics, but those figures already available indicate occupational health and safety work is lagging behind industrial progress. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has been in existence only since 1970. And its research agency, the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, has what seems an impossible task of setting adequate standards. Every year more than 400 new chemicals are introduced, yet the institute has only enough money and manpower to develop a single standard a year for safe exposure to industrial hazards. And those standards, in order to be effective, must be reevaluated constantly, especially in the plastics industry in which worker mortality statistics have comparatively few years from which to draw.

The liver cancer deaths bear this out dramatically. The maximum exposure standard that the agency set for vinyl chloride was 10 times more liberal than that adhered to voluntarily by most of the industry. The official standard in that instance was changed on a temporary emergency basis after the chemical became suspect as a cancer cause. But it shows how standards may vary among plants using dangerous chemicals.

In addition to the backlog of research on new industrial compounds, enforced protection of workers from hazards already known is short of need. Too much of it teeters between federal and state responsibility with neither taking the initiative. OSHA, for example, has only 600 inspectors charged with overseeing all types of industrial health and safety conditions. One estimate is that it would take them 200 years to inspect all the places of work in the nation. The workers cannot wait that long. Solutions to the problems that progress creates must be sought cooperatively at all levels of government.

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