

Vinyl chloride link studied in death of 2 in Connecticut

By BILL PETERSON

Courier-Journal & Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — A federal health investigator said yesterday that there are "suspicious" indications that two persons who live near plastics plants may have contracted rare liver cancer from vinyl chloride in the atmosphere.

Dr. Philip J. Landrigan, of the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC), said the two cancer-related deaths in Connecticut raise the "possibility of danger" in other localities near plastics plants and other places where vinyl chloride is used.

He added, however, that additional study is needed before the exact significance of the cases can be determined.

Landrigan said the present evidence collected in the investigation of the deaths is "worrisome but establishes no exact causal connection."

If confirmed by data from other states, however, the report could add a new dimension to the possible cancer hazard from vinyl chloride, he said.

Massive public and governmental attention has been focused on the vinyl chloride industry since early this year when it was learned that at least four workers at a Louisville plant died from angiosarcoma, a rare cancer of the liver.

The Louisville situation, involving workers at the Bells Lane plant of the B. F. Goodrich Co., touched off fears that thousands of workers in the United States may have been exposed to potentially fatal doses of vinyl-chloride vapors.

Nationwide, more than 6,500 workers are involved either in production of vinyl chloride or in conversion of the chemical to polyvinyl chloride.

At least 13 workers were confirmed victims.

The two nonworker angiosarcoma deaths were disclosed in CDC's weekly Morbidity and Mortality Report. Both were long-time residents of the Bridgeport-Stratford, Conn., area. One was a 73-year-old retired fireman who lived his entire life within two miles of an electrical products factory that uses vinyl chloride to coat wire cables. The other was an 83-year-old woman who lived within a half mile of the vinyl products plant for 35 years.

The two cases were uncovered in a survey CDC asked states to make of health records in areas near vinyl chloride plants.

Landrigan, a medical doctor, said he has received no reports of any similar incidents in Kentucky.

Dr. J. Bradford Block, a Kentucky state occupational health consultant, said a "very thorough" investigation has been made of angiosarcoma cases in the Louisville area.

"To the best of our knowledge there have not been any cases discovered outside the immediate (B. F. Goodrich) plant population," he said.

If there had been, Block said he feels CDC investigators would have found them when they reviewed hospital and public health records in the wake of the Louisville deaths.

(In tests conducted in May by the Environmental Protection Agency of the air in the vicinity of the B. F. Goodrich plant, the average level of vinyl chloride was below one part per million (PPM) parts of air.

(But at one time during the May tests a high reading of 33 PPM was reported at a point two-tenths of a mile from the center of the plant.

(Both the Kentucky and the federal Occupational Safety and Health administrations allow workers to be exposed to 55 PPM. The federal agency, however, is considering allowing no measurable amount of vinyl chloride gas in the air.)

In the Connecticut cases, federal disease-control officers interviewed doctors and relatives of five angiosarcoma victims reported in one area since 1967.

Landrigan said he was able to eliminate all common links for the two cases except environmental or community exposure. The disease is so rare, according to the CDC report, that only 25 to 30 cases occur nationwide each year.

"Here (in one area) we have five in seven years," Landrigan said, "so it's suspicious, highly suspicious."

He said the deaths may have been coincidental, but noted there is a "definite possibility" that the two cases resulted from long-term exposure to vinyl chloride in their communities.

The report said "investigation of additional cases of hepatic angiosarcoma... will be necessary to clarify the significance of these cases."

BFG25557

23430001