

England West

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Cancer study results called 'inconclusive'

Research showing a "statistically significant" incidence of rectal cancer cases among former Monsanto Co. workers is not conclusive, according to the scientist who conducted the study.

Dr. Gary Marsh, assistant professor of biostatistics at the University of Pittsburgh, examined records of about 2,500 people who had worked at the Monsanto plant in Springfield between 1949 and 1966.

The study was made for Monsanto by the University at the request of Local 288 of the International Union of Electrical Workers, which represents Monsanto employees, to look into what the union saw as high cancer incidence at the plant.

"There was a (statistically) significant excess for the rectal cancers, but that was the only significant finding in the whole report and you can't place much weight on it," Marsh said.

He said the results of the study did not support the hypothesis that digestive tract or genital-urinary tract tumors were related to general exposure to chemicals in the plant or were related to when workers were hired.

It found that such cancers, except for tumors of the prostate gland or rectum, were not related to employment at any of 21 specific stations at the plant, he said.

Of chemical workers with prostatic cancer, 29 percent had worked in polystyrene processing, but that was not considered statistically significant, he said.

Among workers with rectal cancer, 57 percent had worked in cellulose nitrate production, and that was considered a statistically significant excess of tumors. But, Marsh said, there is no recent literature linking bowel cancer with exposure to cellulose nitrate.

He said, "We tried to identify a particular workplace or agent they (workers) were exposed to that could have been related to this (cancer)

excess, but the only thing that came out of the report was this rectal thing."

As a result of the findings, Marsh's report recommended "updating the original Springfield study ... so as to better assess the possible risk."

An earlier study suggested there might be an excess of digestive tract cancers and tumors of the genital-urinary system, mostly the prostate gland.

A separate study by a research group from the University of Massachusetts found cancer deaths among former workers at the Springfield plant could be linked to materials used in making vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride, the man who headed that study said.

Dr. Kenneth Rosenman, formerly of the university's Division of Public Health in Amherst, said the investigation of 110 people who worked at the plant from 1950 to 1973 found 34 had died of cancer.

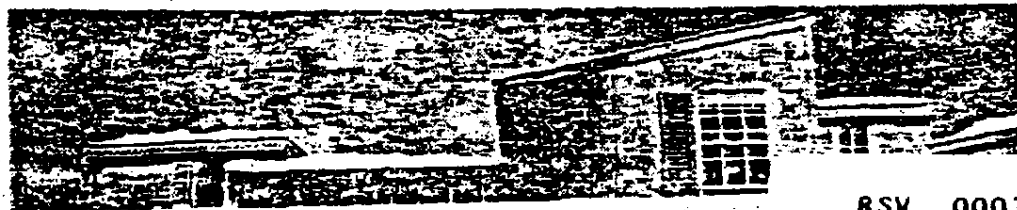
"People who worked there longer, who had a longer latency period, had higher risks of dying of all malignant neoplasms," he said earlier this month. Rosenman is director of occupational and environmental health services for New Jersey.

"The results of the Rosenman study are not confirmed by the University of Pittsburgh study," was the response from James Shriver, manager of the Springfield Monsanto plant.

"The principal difference is that the University of Pittsburgh study shows that those employees who died of digestive cancer were less likely to work for a long period of time with vinyl chloride," Shriver said.

"The information we have from the (Pittsburgh) study shows this (long exposure to vinyl chloride) is not the case" in studied cancer-related deaths.

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