

Chemical scare spurs new work hazard search

BUSINESS INSURANCE ROUNDUP

LOUISVILLE, KY.—The deaths of four workers at the B.F. Goodrich plant here touched off an international investigation of a new occupational disease, to which 6,500 workers in the U.S. and even more in Europe could be exposed.

Dr. J. Bradford Block, medical consultant for the Kentucky Occupational Safety and Health Administration, said that four deaths in Louisville since 1968 and "a possible fifth in Germany" were caused by the chemical vinyl chloride.

The Louisville men died of angiosarcoma, a rare form of liver cancer that is "uniformly fatal" with a survival period of one year, Dr. Block said. Two of the deaths occurred in 1973; one in 1971 and one in 1968. The first report of a vinyl chloride-related death came last December.

Confirmation of the diagnosis by the National Cancer Institute of the United States Public Health Service led to a declaration that angiosarcoma is a new occupational cancer.

At a recent meeting in Washington, D.C., Dr. Marcus Key, director of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), enlisted 35 medical and industry experts to make a worldwide study of the use of vinyl chloride in the manufacturing process and its effect on workers.

Peter Bommarito, president of the United Rubber Workers Union in Akron, said "fast responsible action is mandatory to avert a catastrophe . . ." He has called a meeting of other international union presidents whose members may be exposed to vinyl chloride.

A joint meeting of U.S. health and safety agencies, union and industry representatives to discuss the angiosarcoma deaths was conducted Feb. 1, in Rockville Md., headquarters of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. NIOSH, the National Cancer Institute, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) were among the agencies attending, the NIOSH spokesman said.

And Feb. 15, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) held a public hearing in Rockville on the possible new health hazard.

Meanwhile, Goodrich commented that it has already conducted a program to further reduce worker exposure to hydrocarbons, which are generally

recognized as toxic chemicals when humans are exposed to them in heavy concentrations.

Particular emphasis will be placed on testing of 55 workers at the Louisville plant whose earlier blood tests showed liver abnormalities.

Dr. Block said "we expect that about one-half (of the 55) will still be abnormal and additional tests will be made on them."

BESIDES THE testing and review of medical records, federal safety standards for the use of vinyl chloride are expected to be reviewed.

Even before NIOSH defined angiosarcoma as a new occupational disease, B.F. Goodrich announced it would recognize the deaths as qualifying under the workmen's compensation laws of Kentucky.

The Louisville plant uses vinyl chloride to make polyvinyl chloride, a plastic used for such products as plastic pipe, phonograph records and food containers.

"At this particular point, we don't feel there is a hazard to people who are working with the finished product, because the level of vinyl chloride is so low in the finished product," Dr. Block said. Neither is there a hazard from polyvinyl chloride in food packaging, he said, because of the low concentrations.

Some 6,500 employees in 13 plants in the U.S. are involved in the manufacture of vinyl chloride, the doctor said, and another 15 plants use the chemical in such a way that workers might be exposed to it.

Even more than 6,500 workers could be exposed to the chemical in Europe, because there are more vinyl chloride manufacturers in Europe, Dr. Block said.

At the Goodrich plant in Louisville, 271 of the 1,200 work-

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Hazard . . .

ers are involved in vinyl chloride manufacturing. The company began blood tests on the 271 last September and began a review of medical records of employes in December when it learned of the death of a vinyl chloride worker from the rare liver disease.

FOUR OTHER Goodrich plants have the chemical in their operations—Avon Lake, Oh.; Pedricktown, N.J.; Henry, Il.; and Long Beach, Ca.

About 36 other plants around the country have polyvinyl chloride operations, the NIOSH spokesman said, but no other suspected job-related cases of angiosarcoma have been reported.

Goodrich has been instructed to make some minor improvements in industrial hygiene, but the company already enforces a safety standard for vinyl chloride that is much stricter than that set by the federal OSHA.

Dr. Block said OSHA standards now allow no more than 500 parts of vinyl chloride per million parts of air, a time-weighted average for an eight-hour day. But most major companies, including Goodrich, have set a limit of 50 parts per million.

He predicted the OSHA limit will be greatly reduced following public hearings.

Dr. Maurice N. Johnson, the company's director of environmental health, said in an official company statement that he had received reports concerning the angiosarcoma-caused death of an employe in December.

"A review of medical records uncovered that two other employes had apparently died from the same cause—one in September 1971, and one in March 1973."

The reports are not conclusive, and the causes of death may be subject to verification, Dr. Johnson added.

In addition, NIOSH is conducting a world-wide literature search on the rare disease and the chemical; the State Department is contacting a European nation which reportedly has done vinyl chloride research not yet published in the U.S.; and the Manufacturing Chemists Association is intensifying a study of industrial use of the chemical.

Goodrich has hired Tabershaw-Cooper Associates Inc., a Berkeley, Ca., consulting firm to study its handling of vinyl chloride and its cases.

REPORTS FROM LONDON say process workers in six U.K. plastics plants are being checked by government health experts since receiving an "alert call" from American sources over suspected cancer perils in industry.

It is regarded as urgent enough to demand an immediate warning to comparable operatives in British industry who handle vinyl chloride.

The research warning came from a report published in the U.S. Jan. 24, which suggested that three plant operatives at B.F. Goodrich had died from a rare liver tumor after being exposed to the material.

This substance, widely used in the plastics industry for the production of polyvinyl chloride material, has been under review by scientists in a study of 4,000 American plant workers.

Action on details of the research study which reached Britain from U.S. was felt to be so urgent that British factory experts consulted with the chief medical officer of the big Imperial Chemical Industries corporation, which handles many chemical processes.

Then they decided that every worker handling vinyl chloride should be told there is a possible cancer risk in handling this material.

Chemical inspectors from Britain's Employment Department are taking the matter so seriously that they will visit every plant in the country using the process of "polymerising" V.C.M. into P.V.C. to check health hazards.

Business Insurance learned that a retired British worker recently died at 71 after working in this plant-process for many years.

Nicholas Scott, Employment Undersecretary, said "Anxiety has been aroused by the report of this U.S. study group on the industrial use of vinyl chloride. The evidence needs careful scrutiny before the risk can be substantiated. Members of my department have begun discussions to decide what further action is necessary to protect workers."

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