

NEW PERIL FEARED IN VINYL CHLORIDE

Doctor Says Data Hint Link
With Genetic Damage

By DAVID BURMAN

WASHINGTON, Aug. 21—A

respected medical researcher testified today that there was growing evidence that vinyl chloride, the raw material from which many plastic products are made, might cause both genetic damage and birth defects.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, professor of environmental medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine of the City University of New York, gave the testimony at hearings of the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on the Environment.

A second witness, Dr. Joseph Wagoner from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, further testified that recent tests strongly suggest that vinyl chloride might heighten the risk of cancer in the respiratory system, the blood-forming tissues and the brain and central nervous system.

The chemical has already been shown to cause an unusually high rate of a rare kind of liver cancer among workers exposed to it during the manufacturing process.

The hearings, headed by Senator John V. Tunney, Democrat of California, were held in a week when House and Senate conferees ended a three-month stalemate and began trying to work out compromise language for a toxic substance bill.

Purpose of Legislation

This legislation is designed to provide a mechanism for testing industrial chemicals, consumer chemicals and all agricultural chemicals with the exception of pesticides before they are sold in the marketplace.

The technique of changing vinyl chloride into polyvinyl chloride was discovered about 50 years ago. Since then it has become the most used plastic in the United States, in such items as upholstery, pipes, and floor tiles. Interior, exterior, and other uses include non-water pipe, floor tile, and floor tile and photographic records.

At present in the United States, 14 plants employing 1,500 workers produce vinyl chloride, 27 plants employing 5,000 workers transform vinyl chloride into polyvinyl chloride, and hundreds of thousands of workers are employed in manufacturing the polyvinyl chloride products.

Last January, Government scientists learned that a number of employees at the B. F. Goodrich vinyl chloride plant in Louisville, Ky., had died of the rare form of liver cancer. Since then, several studies have been initiated, hair sprays and cosmetics using vinyl chloride as a propellant have been banned, and rules regarding the exposure of workers to the chemical have been proposed.

During today's hearing by the environmental subcommittee, Dr. Selikoff said that it has now been proved that vinyl chloride, long assumed to be benign, was not.

"I regret to say," the researcher added, "that early findings indicate that vinyl chloride may be mutagenic, as well as carcinogenic."

Noting that the evidence was limited and required extension and confirmation, Dr. Selikoff said laboratory tests conducted in New York and London had indicated that vinyl chloride "may affect the strands of material that carry the continuity of the human race from generation to generation."

Dr. Wagoner, director of field studies of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, said the initial studies had found that death from liver cancer among workers exposed to large amounts of vinyl chloride occurred 12 times more frequently than would normally be expected.

But Dr. Wagoner added that the most recent results that the unusually high level of cancer were not limited to the liver. "At this stage of our research, a 57 per cent increase in deaths due to cancer of the lung would be expected, already has been observed," he said.

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