

To: I.R. MGRS.

From: R.M. MONTGOMERY

ALLON BEACON JOURNAL Sunday 10-26-75

Lung cancer takes toll of workers at chemical company in Philadelphia

By WILLARD S. RANDALL and
STEPHEN D. SOLOMON
The Philadelphia Inquirer

At Matty Wernyski's funeral in August of 1969, his widow, Angela, turned to Joe Karcher, one of Wernyski's coworkers who was serving as a pallbearer.

"Why don't you get the hell out of that place?" she sobbed. "The same thing is going to happen to you."

But Karcher, like the others, mostly men with limited skills and little education, stayed on at the Rohm and Haas plant in the Bridesburg section of Philadelphia, piling up the overtime and pursuing the trappings of the good life.

"He was a family man," his wife would say later. "He hated the job. He took a correspondence course to get a better job. He got his diploma, but then he got sick."

WHEN THEY wheeled Joe Karcher into his last company picnic, friends say, he looked awful, a shell of the 175-pound, physically fit man they knew.

And when he died on November 9, 1971, at the age of 37, his buddy — big, tough, 200-pound Bob Pontious — softened for a moment, and turning to his wife, Marie, with tears in his eyes, murmured, "Maybe I'll be next."

He WAS next. But not the last.

For 20 years, the management of Rohm and Haas, a world-wide chemical firm based in Philadelphia, failed to halt the exposure of dozens of employees to a cancer-producing substance, despite its awareness of the deaths of many workers.

Workers at the Rohm and Haas plant began dying in 1955. Fatalities continued through May 1975.

At least 54 workers died of respiratory cancer over two decades, according to a year-long investigation.

The company acknowledges that 29 of the deaths were due to exposure to bis-chloro-methyl ether (BCME). By matching medical records, work histories and other documents, and through interviews with fellow workers, it has been determined that 25 additional respiratory cancer deaths also occurred among workers exposed to BCME.

IT WAS ALSO learned that:

The company failed to report deaths of workers who died after 1971 of respiratory cancer, despite regulations of the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act.



Dr. Figueroa examines X-ray of lung cancer victim.

Inspectors from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) who visited the plant between 1971 and 1974 were told by the company officials that there were no serious problems as a result of exposure to carcinogens.

On company records for the period 1971 to 1974 the company recorded seven deaths — five fewer than found by the Inquirer — but OSHA officials said there was no record of any deaths having been reported.

Rohm and Haas lobbied against toxic substances legislation that would have required pre-market screening of suspected carcinogens.

As a member of the Manufacturing Chemists Association, a Washington-based lobby for large chemical firms, the company sought to discredit tests of BCME on mice and rats that resulted in cancer. In 1973 hearings before the Federal Standards Advisory Committee on Carcinogens, Dr. Ellington Beavers, a Rohm and Haas vice president, joined industry representatives in arguing that BCME be labelled as an animal but not a human carcinogen.

Rohm and Haas began producing BCME in 1948 to be used as an intermediate chemical in the production of ion exchange resins, used in purifying water for nuclear power plants, nuclear submarines and water treatment facilities and in recovering uranium from low-grade ore. In 1950, production of pure BCME was halted when it was found that the chemical was eating away the production kettles. The company then began using a substi-

tute chemical, CME, which contains 2 to 8 percent BCME.

IN DECEMBER 1962, the company began X-raying workers at the plant. In order to avoid creating alarm, the firm included in the tests 125 workers who had not been exposed to BCME.

In early 1963, F. Otto Haas, company president, persuaded the Pennsylvania Manufacturers Association, a lobby representing industrialists in the state, to have bills introduced in the state legislature that would amend the Workmen's Compensation Act and the Occupational Diseases Act to protect corporate executives from lawsuits by their workers or survivors. The bills, signed into law that August, were instrumental in helping the company privately settle claims by the survivors of 27 BCME workers in 1974 and 1975.

In 1967, by then aware that 23 workers exposed to BCME had died of respiratory cancer, the company received a report from Hazleton Laboratories in Falls Church, Va. The study showed that of 50 mice exposed to BCME vapors at a dose of one part per million, 37 or 74 percent had died within 95 days. Of 10 mice exposed at what was considered an average industrial level of 9.8 parts of BCME for a million parts of air, all died in 10 days.

AFTER RECEIVING the Hazleton report, the company says it began a four-year \$6.5-million program to "button up" the production process and use CME in a closed system.

In June 1971, the company was told by Dr. Norton Nelson, a cancer researcher at New York University who had been conducting inhalation tests on wild rats, that BCME was the most potent carcinogen he had ever tested.

Also that year, Dr. William Figueroa, a pulmonary specialist, began treating Rohm and Haas worker Robert Pontious for lung cancer. Alerted by knowledge that other workers at the company were dying of lung cancer, Figueroa tried to collect information from Rohm and Haas about workers exposed to BCME, but the company was not candid about the information it supplied, Figueroa said.

FIGUEROA THEN decided to base his research on data supplied by Pontious. He learned that the four respiratory cancer deaths that had been detected in the company's X-ray screening project that began in 1962 were from only 44 men who had been exposed to BCME, a fact that had earlier been known only to company executives. The other 81 men in the project were from other parts of the plant where BCME was not used.

Figueroa says that if he and the company consultant he assisted in administering the study that began in 1962 had been told which 44 men had been exposed to BCME, "I would have turned the spotlight on Four in 44 would have been phenomenal," he said. Figueroa added that this was 27 times the normal rate as cited by the American Cancer Society.

Rohm and Haas continues its \$20 million a year ion exchange resin production at its Philadelphia plant and at plants in Europe and Japan.

23997001

BFG28914