

Mother's alarm may bring ban of 'Superelasticbubbleplastic'

By Deena Mirow

When 6-year-old Esther Hazlett had a coughing spell and complained of a burning throat after using a new toy last May, she launched a chain of events which may result in the item being banned from the market.

"When something bothers me enough, I do something about it," said the child's mother, Lynn Hazlett, who was upset by her daughter's reaction after blowing up plastic balloons made from a material called "Superelasticbubbleplastic."

The Cleveland woman wrote letters complaining about the product to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Bureau of Product Safety, Consumers Union (publisher of Consumers Reports) and the toy manufacturer, Wham-O Manufacturing Co.

In her letter, Mrs. Hazlett said she did not think the

product, which contains polyvinyl acetate, acetone pigments and plastic fortifiers, was safe for children's use.

"The packaging and label carried the following warnings: 'Flammable mixture: Do not use near fire or flame.' 'Do not chew or swallow.' 'Keep away from painted surfaces or furniture,'" she wrote. "On the basis of this information, one would think that this item should be stored in a locked cupboard with things like ammonia and drain cleaner."

She said her husband closely supervised use of the toy, as suggested on the tube, but her daughter's reaction occurred anyway.

Wham-O did not reply to her letter.

The FDA told her it already had evaluated that kind of plastic balloon and "an exemption was granted from classification as a banned hazardous substance."

However, the Consumers Union was interested in Mrs. Hazlett's complaint and launched an investiga-

tion which resulted in a lengthy petition asking the new federal Consumer Product Safety Commission to ban the acetone plastic balloon material made by several manufacturers.

The commission held a public hearing earlier this week on the plastic balloons and its decision is expected in about a month. Mrs. Hazlett's letter — which CU credits with starting its investigation — was entered as evidence.

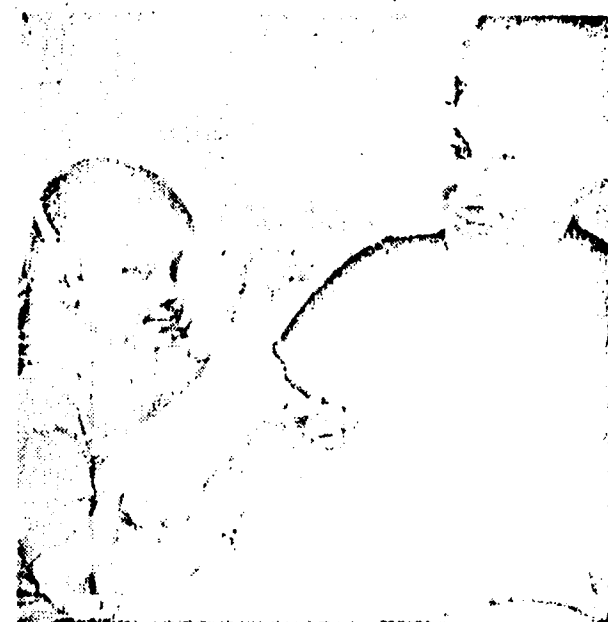
Among CU's findings:

- The exemption, granted in 1967 upon a request from Chemical Sundries Co., makers of Wonder Plastic Balloons, was given quickly with no prior published notice and no opportunity for public comment.

- The FDA during 1970 and 1971 received inquiries and complaints about Superelasticbubbleplastic from 10 state and local government agencies, one chamber of commerce and one hospital.

- At least one township and one county have banned sale of the plastic balloon material.

- More than 40 complaints from individuals



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Mrs. Hazlett watches Esther play with a toy she considers safe.

have been received by the FDA and CPSC, which recently assumed responsibility for this kind of product.

- Children in a Florida elementary school had been caught sniffing the plastic to get a "high."

"It is clear that the only way to use plastic balloon toys containing acetone safely is not to use them at all," CU lawyer Carol Cowgill said at the public hearing. "No conceivable warning labels or instructions could adequately protect a child from the unavoidable, intrinsic aspira-

tion hazard associated with all such toys," she added.

Miss Cowgill said representatives of manufacturers who make the toys argued that millions of tubes of the plastic are sold each year and that the relative number of complaints are few. They also said the toy was cheap and provided a lot of value for the money.

Mrs. Hazlett said she is pleased with the results she got from her letter, but disappointed that the government agency she wrote to did not take an interest in her complaint.

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