

The Chemical World This Week

EVIDENCE MOUNTS LINKING VINYL CHLORIDE AND CANCER

The growing suspicion that exposure to vinyl chloride has led to the deaths of polyvinyl chloride workers from a most rare form of liver cancer has apparently been reinforced. A research study in which rats exposed to high levels (apparently 30,000 p.p.m.) of vinyl chloride vapor also develop angiosarcoma of the liver was slated to be disclosed publicly in the U.S. by Prof. Cesare Maltoni of the University of Bologna, Italy, just after press time. The study has been supported by a consortium of European firms, including Imperial Chemical Industries (C&EN, Feb. 11, page 8).

What's more, the view that the deaths are an isolated event limited to just one of B. F. Goodrich's U.S. plants and not proved to be occupationally linked is fast disappearing. Four angiosarcoma deaths now have been confirmed at the BFG plant instead of the three revealed earlier (C&EN, Jan. 28, page 6). Another diagnosed case of angiosarcoma occurred in an ICI employee who worked in a U.K. vinyl chloride operation for 20 years, sources in the U.K. and U.S. say.

The clustering of the four BFG cases "cannot be explained by chance alone," Dr. Marcus M. Key, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, told those at a Cleveland briefing on the cancer hazard earlier last week.

What action the U.S. takes, if any, beyond interim procedures NIOSH has recommended hinges upon the outcome of a fact-finding hearing at the Labor Department on Feb. 15. Prof. Maltoni, BFG, Dow Chemical, organized labor, and others were scheduled to testify.

AFL-CIO was to present a unified, organized labor position urging the department to promulgate an emergency temporary standard, a procedure used earlier for 14 other carcinogens. Dr. V. K. Rowe, Dow's top toxicologist, was expected to oppose this procedure, asking instead for regular rule-making for a permanent standard. He suggests the deaths result from gross exposure 10 to 30 years in the past.

All four BFG deaths, as well as

another four liver disease cases at the plant under investigation, involved persons who cleaned polymerization reactors after this step in the suspension process for PVC. BFG has used a less hazardous cleaning process for the past five years, however.

Significantly, the latency period for most cancers to develop nearly



Key: not explained by chance

matches the great growth in the U.S. PVC industry that has taken place over the past two decades or so. NIOSH estimates there are 5000 workers at risk in U.S. PVC plants and 1500 at vinyl chloride plants.

NIOSH will contract out an epidemiology study that will be independent of the study on workers already under way at member firms of the Manufacturing Chemists Association. MCA's results will not be ready for "at least two to three months," a spokesman says. Earlier, MCA halted circulation of its 1972 safety data sheet on vinyl chloride, which stated that human carcinogenicity had not been observed.

Plastic prices get big boosts

As U.S. chemical makers sort out the fine points of the recent Cost of Living Council action relaxing Phase IV price controls on petrochemicals, plastics resins, and synthetic fibers (C&EN, Feb. 4, page 4), price hikes are being announced with resin makers leading the way.

So far three major resin producers—Dow Chemical, Monsanto, and Union Carbide—have spelled out large and wide-ranging price increases for resins following the CLC action. These boosts come after a year in which listed chemical prices have moved up relatively modestly. According to Labor Department data, the price index for plastics resins and materials moved up 4.1% between December 1972 and December 1973. For chemicals and allied products the gain was 4.9%. Of course, the "gray market" price for resins and many other chemical products has been spiraling upward for some months.

Among the recent price moves Monsanto has posted increases of 5 cents a pound on bulk shipments of polystyrene resins, and increases of 4 cents a pound on bulk acrylonitrile-butadiene-styrene (ABS) and styrene-acrylonitrile (SAN) resins. New price for general-purpose polystyrene is 19 cents a pound. Truckload quantities of ABS resins now range from 32 to 45 cents a pound, and SAN in truckload bags is 27 cents a pound. Monsanto says that "these increases are consistent with the Cost of Living Council action of Jan. 30" and reflect increased cost of raw materials, energy, and distribution, among other factors.

Dow, citing reasons much the same as Monsanto's, has raised the price of its general-purpose polystyrene from 17 to 26 cents a pound. ABS and SAN now go for 32 cents a pound, up from 23.5 and 24 cents a pound. Price of high-density injection- and blow-molding polyethylene was increased from 14.5 to 18.5 cents a pound. Dow's low-density film-grade polyethylene is now 17 cents a pound, up from 13 cents. The company says that these new prices still do not match those of the world market but should help it compete on the world market for petrochemical feedstocks.

Carbide's new prices for high-density injection- and blow-molding polyethylene are the same as Dow's, but its low-density film grade is a bit higher at 18.5 cents a pound. SAN is now 28 cents a pound, up from 22 cents, while high-impact polystyrene increased from 16.5 cents a pound to 21.5 cents a pound. Carbide raised the tab on its polyvinyl chloride resin suspensions by 5 cents bringing the

Letters

Chasing rainbows?

SIR: Once more we are regaled by the report of a committee composed—as usual! —“of leading educators,” that of the Panel on Alternate Approaches to Graduate Education (C&EN, Dec. 24, 1973, page 35). I feel at a great disadvantage in having only the C&EN report in front of me but the necessity of making at least some reply before, hopefully, this report follows others into oblivion, mandates a quick (and mercifully brief) comment.

Once more the universities are being told that they must buckle on their soup kitchen aprons and save society! Let's make sure that we train these students in all those things which this panel *thinks* society wants and yet we of the universities are so ill qualified to do! The list of shibboleths is breath-taking: “enhance preparation for problem solving,” “increase the breadth of students' outlooks,” “make them aware . . . of industry” (Do I get cucumbers from sunshine or sunshine from cucumbers? I always forget!)—away with discipline-oriented attitudes (!)—“reorient themselves to fulfill a pivotal role in societal planning” (I enjoyed that one!). “too many overtrained students” (whatever that means!). “each major discipline . . . re-examine its . . . aims and social uses,” “preferential treatment to groups hitherto discriminated (unfairly?) against” (Dr. Page's pronouncements on that question in column 3 of page 36 were sophistry of a high order). Need I continue?

One might seriously ask many questions but surely the first one is whether, perhaps, we have not already chased too many rainbows and whether each of us individually and departmentally should not simply ask ourselves whether we have not already strayed too far from our field of competence and expertise, that of educating students to think in chemical terms.

The hilarity engendered by the metaphor (?) at the end of the article prompted me to recall that, no doubt apocryphal, story about the great leader (or was it a committee?) who, having exhorted his followers on to greater things, replied to the anguished question of “but what should we do?” with the ringing phrase “EVEN MORE!”

Thomas M. Dunn
Professor of Chemistry, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.

More on petrochemicals

SIR: The Jan. 7 issue of C&EN (page 5) quotes the Shah of Iran as saying, “You cannot get petrochemical products from atomic energy.” Most of your readers will realize that statement is not quite correct. Mineral oil, the Shah's oil, is basically a grand mixture of hydrocarbons. Given limestone as a source of carbon, i.e. CO₂, water as a source of hydrogen via electrolysis, heat and electrical energy from nuclear power plants and some selected catalysts, the chemical industry can produce hydrocarbons as desired. Coal may now be a cheaper source of carbon than limestone and can yield either carbon monoxide or

dioxide, or carbon monoxide and hydrogen with addition of water, without nuclear energy.

My point is that production of petrochemicals is possible without natural oil or gas, and even without coal given nuclear energy. The process is just one of energy conversion. The cost of hydrocarbons via this route sets an upper limit, in the long run, on the price of oil. That upper limit is probably not as much above the present price for oil as many would imagine. Much further along the road, an upper limit on the price of uranium is in turn set by the cost of recovery from the Gulf Stream for example, and doesn't frighten me at all.

I do agree with the Shah in the sense that an overall systems approach to oil consumption should be taken, and the best use be made of this nonrenewable resource. However, I remember two lines from my first chemistry textbook, authored by Prof. Cornish, “You can make anything from a salve to a star, if you only know how from black coal tar.” The textbook was written before Chadwick proposed the existence of the neutron, and before oil was a commodity in the Middle East.

Deep River, Ont.

W. H. Stevens

Use your right to vote

SIR: I am in accord with your editorial concern about the lack of votes sent in by ACS members in various elections and other matters where voting of the membership is concerned.

How about increasing the membership charges for those members who can't muster enough energy to vote? As an alternate, give reduced rates to those who are sufficiently interested in the Society to utilize their voting rights. That should gather a few more votes.

R. W. Curtis

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No asbestos here

SIR: I would like to point out that on page 19 of your Dec. 10, 1973, issue of C&EN, under the article “Asbestos health question perplexes experts,” you have published a picture of a cement worker shaking out a bag of Utility Cement, which happens to be an insulating cement manufactured by C-E Refractories. We have not used asbestos in this product since early 1972, and we certainly don't appreciate the implication that this product is one that is dangerous to workers.

In the future, I would suggest that before using proprietary items in your articles you check with the manufacturer as to contents of materials, particularly in such sensitive areas as asbestos.

R. T. Hegeman

President, C-E Refractories, Valley Forge, Pa.

Yes, Dominique, there are . . .

SIR: Yes, Dominique, in spite of all rumors to the contrary, chemists are people (C&EN, Feb. 4, page 3). Some of us love the beauty of sun, stars and wind; some of us even write poems about sunsets.

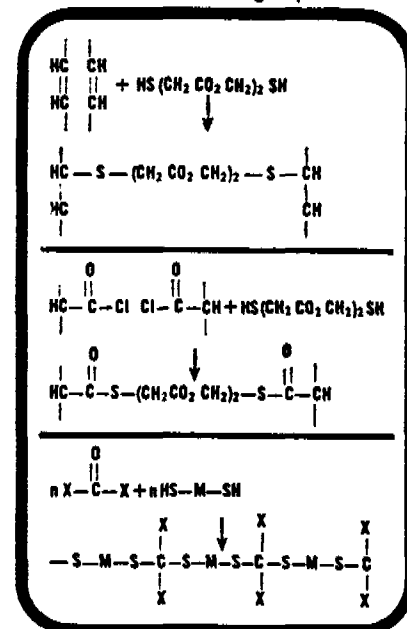
A long time ago it was shown that there is a positive correlation between all human excellencies if you are willing to accept large feet as an excellency. So chemists, who are well above average in intelligence, are also musical, good, kind, and great people in general—with a few exceptions.

H. B. Hass

Summit, N.J.

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