

environment

Is there a workplace cancer epidemic?

The question of a cancer epidemic in the workplace took center stage and drew heated debate at a "media seminar" sponsored by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in Chicago earlier this month.

At the opening session, workers' and regulators' rights of access to company data on the effects of chemicals on employees held the spotlight (CW, Sept. 19, p. 28).

And during the final session, OSHA Director Eula Bingham disclosed that the generic cancer standard, proposed two years ago, is scheduled to be issued "within weeks." Questioned later for a more specific date, she said only that it would be by the end of October.

The seminar, billed as *Lost in the Workplace: Is There an Occupational Disease Epidemic?*, drew about 80 from the media and more than 300 from unions, industry, and regulatory and environmental groups.

Cancer Epidemic? "There is no cancer epidemic," said Ronald Lang, executive director of the American Industrial Health Council. Lang quoted various scientific sources as the basis for his claim and said that the only epidemic is "in the minds of those who need one to justify massive new government programs and appropriations."

But David Rall, director of the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences, would not budge from his position on occupationally caused cancers. An author of the Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare document that estimated that 20-25% of cancers are occupationally caused (CW, Oct. 28, 1978, p. 27), he contended, "The 20% figure looks pretty good to me."

In defending the HEW workplace cancer estimate, which was produced for

hearings on the OSHA generic cancer standard but has not yet been published for peer review, Rall hit at some of its critics. He said Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Sciences, who claims there is no cancer epidemic (CW, Sept. 5, p. 5), is "not an expert on cancer." And he said John Higginson of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (Lyon, France) "has been changing his view lately, I think." Higginson had said the data presented in the study "do not make a good case" (CW, Oct. 25, 1978, p. 27).

Moreover, Samuel Epstein of the University of Illinois' School of Public Health said HEW's 38% estimate "seri-

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ously underestimates the true hazards."

But Robert Olsen, professor of biochemistry and medicine at St. Louis University, countered by calling the estimates "wild," and said they are "not contributing to solving our problems."

Lang suggested that the OSHA generic cancer standard "may provide the first real indication of whether government and industry can work together in such a complex undertaking, or whether fundamental public decisions of this kind must be set by judges with no training."

Chances of industry, labor and regulators working together in this instance appear to be slim. For example, Lang said the agency would like to "adopt some very simple criteria for carcinogenicity." The original proposal would require any chemical substance that caused any kind of tumor in a single animal test to be classified and regulated as a carcinogen. "Cancer is simply too complex to be dealt with in this simplistic manner," says Lang.

Rall, however, contends that "one well-designed and administered test should be sufficient to initiate regulatory action."

Bad Publicity: Industry was upset about more than cancer epidemic arguments. In the publicity brochure for the seminar, OSHA said there is a "massive but silent slaughter" of 100,000 Americans, who die each year from exposure to materials in the workplace.

Lang described industry as "dismayed and angry that a responsible federal

agency should be making inaccurate and inflammatory charges."

Bruce Karth, Du Pont's medical director, said the 100,000 figure is "an excellent example of highly questionable mathematical adroitness that adds to the continuing deterioration in the tone and substance of the dialogue over occupational health."

John Froines, deputy director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, predicted that occupational health will be the "most important issue in the 1980s and 1990s." He reasons that "when one looks for [an exposure problem], one finds it."

Froines cited as an example the "lack of control of lead in the workplace. In many foundries the standards are not met. Exposures are as high as 5,000 parts per million, well above the existing standard."

William McCarville, director of environmental affairs for Monsanto, agreed that "to know of a problem and not act responsibly is inexcusable. But it seems to me that to cry wolf based on insufficient evidence is also wrong."

Du Pont's Karth added, "Neither the record-keeping nor the state of knowledge is adequate to permit either industry or government to issue conclusive statements concerning the dimension of the occupational-disease problem."

And Anthony Masarochi, director of health and safety for the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers union, said it is "solely a question of who pays: now the workers pay with their health." He charged that "a polluted environment is necessary to maximize production."

In the face of these differing views, the chances of reaching agreement among the different groups appear slim indeed. □

AIHC's Lang can't use simplistic approach.



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HEW's Rall: one good test enough for action.



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