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Attack on cancer risk embarrasses Du Pont

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ck Edmonds
ashington Staff Writer

WILMINGTON — It has been some
ne, nearly three years, since any-
ie publicly accused the Du Pont Co.
being an environmental criminal,
it last week the company was faced
ith a forceful new attack on that
d theme.

The forum was the opinion section
f last Sunday's Washington Post; the
harge — that for 35 years, Du Pont
nowingly "subjected workers to
eta-napthylamine and benzidine,
chemicals with a potent cancer-caus-
ing effect.

Barry Castleman, a chemical engi-
neer and consultant who often works
with the Environmental Defense
Fund in Washington, wrote that the
company has recently been trying to
put "sanctimonious varnish over
criminal business conduct." His arti-
cle accused Du Pont of keeping find-
ings about the dangers of the sub-
stances from the public and its own
employes, 335 of whom by current
count have contracted bladder can-
cers.

Reaction from the eighth floor of
Du Pont's headquarters here, where
its large public affairs department is
based, was muted. By week's end,
there had been no threats of lawsuits
or demands for retractions.

But the company did issue a six-
page question-and-answer handout
on the two chemicals, describing
Castleman's article as slanted, disput-
ing him on some facts, and suggest-
ing that he had doctored the grim
history of the episode the better to
flay at big business.

According to Du Pont's own ac-
count, the cancer-causing potential
of the two chemicals, used as inter-
mediates in the manufacture of dyes,
was recognized by company doctors
as early as 1935; efforts were made to
isolate workers from contact with
beta and benzidine, and the company
finally abandoned the manufacture
of both products and came clean
about the resulting health disaster,
when the cancer link was scientifi-
cally proven.

The company accepts "full respon-
sibility" for the cancer and "has paid
out some $5.5 million in compensa-
tion to affected employes and their
families," according to last week's
statement. And it made its data avail-
able at a Department of Labor hear-
ing on carcinogens in 1973 and at a
similar congressional hearing in
1976.

All this said, the beta and benzi-
dine episode remains an embarrass-
ment to a company that boasts of
safety consciousness and maintains
an elaborate facility (the Haskell
Laboratories) to test chemicals for

(See DU PONT on 7-B)

Cancer risk embarrasses Du Pont Co.

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toxicity. Among the particulars:

• The 335 cases of bladder cancer developed among 2,000 workers exposed (most of them at the Chambers Works in Deepwater, N.J.). That means that the rate of incidence is over 15 percent.

• Because the cancer has a latency period of roughly 20 to 40 years at the lower exposure rates of the 1950s and '60s, Du Pont anticipates that additional employes may contract bladder cancers as late as 1996.

• Du Pont's first response, later judged ineffective, was to try to decrease the amount of beta in the air where employes worked with it. Manufacture of the product was abandoned in 1955. Benzidine (a related chemical and a weaker carcinogen) continued to be manufactured until 1967.

• The Swiss, according to Castleman (and Du Pont does not dispute him on this point), stopped using beta at the first sign of trouble in 1938 and developed other methods of dye synthesis. Du Pont waited for firm scientific proof of the cancer link before doing the same.

"It's a different world now," a Du Pont spokesman said last week. "We are so much more conscious of these things [carcinogens], and we can identify them so much more quickly. ... I don't believe this can happen again, certainly not to that magnitude."

Castleman takes a less philosphical view. "People who do things like this belong in jail," he said on Friday. "If their [the Du Pont Co.'s] victims had been their customers rather than their workers, they would have been liable for all they were worth ...

"As it is, with workman's compensation, the company's liability is limited ... It's a no-fault system that assumes a good-faith attempt to keep the workplace safe. That's a nice assumption, but it doesn't apply here."

DuPont's Record In Business Ethics: Another View

y Barry I. Castleman

THE "Five-Part Quiz on Corporate Ethics" offered to readers Outlook two weeks ago by the Dumt public affairs office contended at critics of business morality have iled to appreciate the complexities the ethical problems that face siness executives. A fuller undermding of such issues, the article gested, would vindicate the acns of DuPont, for one.

At least one of the examples cited this article deserves further dision. This was an account of Dont's discovery in the 1930s that orkers manufacturing dyes using intermediate called Beta-naphylamine were developing cancer. hereupon, "We made full disclose in the medical journals, cleaned p the process, and took care of emloyes to the best of medical scice's ability."

The cancer hazard in dye making as brought to the attention of the uPonts by the late Dr. Wilhelm C. lueper, who is widely regarded as e father of environmental cancer revention. Fortunately, Dr. Hueper nd others who were involved in this truggle in the 1930s and '40s have ft the account of industrial history nd ethics which follows. This story ill even be informative to the Dunt public relations writers, whose Mobil ad" view of past events was s incorrect as it was self-serving.

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Dr. Hueper had emigrated from ermany and was working under the utelage of a physician at the Uniersity of Pennsylvania in the early 30s. This gentleman was also the ersonal physician of Irenee Du-ont. One day old DuPont had a old and Hueper came along for the ouse call. Dr. Hueper asked to see he DuPont Company's dye works, nd this was arranged within a short ime. He was horrified to find dyes eing made with benzidine and Beta-naphthylamine, with absolutely o industrial hygiene precautions aken. White, powdery dust was everywhere, and the work areas where he deadly amines were handled were in no way cordoned off from he larger chemical works. Hueper oted that it had been known since he turn of the century in Europe hat these conditions led to a very igh incidence of cancer of the bladder. Hadn't DuPont had that experience, too? The quick answer was "No," but within a few months there were 23 cases of bladder cancer noticed among past and present workers.

A few years later Hueper was working for DuPont Company, and someone seriously suggested that maybe they should just hire people for two years apiece in the dangerous areas and then lay them off. Hueper explained that if they did that, they would be mass-producing cancer. Meanwhile, Swiss dye chemists found other routes of dye synthesis that obviated the need for Beta-naphthylamine, which was abandoned in Switzerland in 1938.

Hueper's most brilliant research was done while he was at DuPont. For 40 years, it had been known that workers exposed to Beta were getting bladder cancer, but when the substance was tested on rats it produced no effect. Dr. Hueper tested Beta on dogs, and it produced numerous bladder tumors. He theorized that there were species-specific metabolic pathways for this substance, which itself was not carcinogenic. However, in some species Beta was metabolized into an active form, which accumulated at high concentration in the urine. The dog "digested" the chemical much the way man did, but the rat was able to pass it off without chemically converting the Beta to its deadly form. Hueper even identified the carcinogenic metabolite in the urine of his dogs.

Word soon got around that the head of the DuPont research labs had announced to the local papers that *he* had made this dicovery. Hueper, enraged, went to see the editor, saying that the big shot had never set foot in his laboratory. "I call that theft," fumed Hueper. The editor calmed him down and called the lab director, who admitted that the work was not his after all. "By then, I knew my days at DuPont were counted," Hueper told me. The scientific report was published in 1938, around the time Hueper left DuPont. After that time, Hueper said, DuPont toxicological research that was bad for business was treated as a trade secret and withheld from publication.

Wrote Hueper in 1943:

"Industrial concerns are in general not particularly anxious to have the occurrence of occupational cnacers among their employes or of environmental cancers among the consumers of their products made a matter of public records. Such publicity might reflect unfavorably upon their business activities and oblige them to undertake extensive and expensive technical and sanitary changes in their production methods and in the types of products manufactured. There is, moreover, the distinct possibility of becoming involved in compensation suits with extravagant financial claims by the injured parties. It is, therefore, not an uncommon practice that some pressure is exerted by the parties financially interested in such matters to keep information on the occurrence of industrial cancer well under cover."

In this paper, Hueper called upon industry to find substitutes for carcinogenic substances such as secondary aromatic amines and asbestos.

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DuPont finally stopped using Beta in 1955. But Beta's chemical cousin, benzidine, persisted as a mainstay in the manufacture of numerous dyes for cotton, paper and leather. Hueper had told DuPont that benzidine was carcinogenic in 1936, but benzidine proved to be not so easily substituted as Beta.

An important international medical congress was held in London in 1948, at which the chief medical officer of the DuPont Company presented a paper to show that benzidine was not a cause of industrial cancer, and that all the cases of bladder cancer in his factories could be laid at the door of Beta, whose use he said was being abandoned.

In the early months of 1949 the medical officer to the Imperial Chemical Industries Dyestuffs Division visited the DuPont Chambers Works dye plant. This man, the late Dr. Michael Williams, was accompanied by another British researcher, and they were shown around by the corporate medical director who had given the paper at the London medical congress. After the plant tour, he drove Dr. Williams and his colleague to their next destination, quite a long drive. Dr. Williams, who often recounted the story, noticed that his companion in the back of the cs had his eyes closed, and said to th DuPont doctor, "Look, you are company man, and I am a compan man, and Dr. So-and-So is asleep Can you explain to me why, after th records and so on that you hav shown to us today, you are so certai that benzidine is not causing any the trouble?"

He got the reply, witnessed by th other Briton, who was in fact no asleep but thinking, "We here kno very well that benzidine is causin bladder cancer, but it is compan policy to incriminate only the on substance, Beta-naphthylamine."

Dr. Williams had only recentl joined the giant Imperial Chemica firm, where he later became know as an ardent campaigner against oc cupational cancer hazards.

DuPont did not withdraw fro the benzidine dye business unt 1973. According to company record there were 339 known cases of ur nary bladder cancer ascribed to ben zidine and Beta among DuPon workmen during the years 195 1974. Even accounting for the 20-2 year lapsed period between onset exposure and development cancer, it is obvious that this contin uing epidemic of cancer was bot foreseen and preventable.

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The DuPont public relations de partment was not content to merel rewrite history, but went on to le ture The Post's readers about mora ity, of all things. The writer admon ished that "we give up the Mor Rectitude Race. If we consider th possibility that most people in bus ness have pretty much the sam base of values as most of their criti . . ." I could well imagine Dr. Hue er's reaction to the suggestion th he was the moral equivalent of th DuPont executives and their med cal minions.

He called them chiselers, the ca lous businessmen who saved a fe thousand dollars on industrial hy giene engineering. He railed at thes for suppressing the deadly trut from their workers, with their "fle ible" front-men in medicine, law an public relations. Bill Hueper learne about business ethics and occup tional cancer from the people wh wrote the book. "The only thin they understand is jail and bad pub licity."

The public's fears and suspicion of business will only be allayed whe outfits like DuPont, Velsicol (Thal Firestone (Radial 500 tires), Ford (Pintos), Hooker Chemical (Lov Canal) and their ilk stop giving busi ness a bad name. Until then, sanct monious varnish over criminal busi ness conduct serves only to warn that the danger persists.

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