

## Mystery. Ailment

# Industrial Poisoning Plagues Borden Plant in Ohio; Workers Left Weak, Even Crippled; Cause Unknown

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Two years ago, Thomas F. Meade considered himself a lucky man when he landed a job tending machines at Borden Inc.'s vinyl-materials plant here. After all, the economy was in a slump, and six months earlier he had been laid off his previous job at an air-conditioner factory.

"I thought I was getting a good break—a good job that paid well," the 22-year-old Mr. Meade says. But these days, Mr. Meade figures that getting the job at the Borden unit was the most unfortunate thing that ever happened to him. The reason is that he is crippled—he fears permanently—an apparent victim of industrial poisoning. To walk, he must wear knee-to-heel braces on his legs.

Mr. Meade may be more severely affected than anyone else in the plant. But in recent days, tests have shown that as many as 100 men and women out of about 950 production workers may suffer some degree of poisoning. At least seven of the cases are already considered serious, and it is feared that the number could grow.

The affliction, called peripheral neuropathy by medical authorities, attacks the nerves that control muscles in human limbs, causing weakness, limpness and lack of coordination. Many important aspects of the disease remain a mystery.

As yet, no one has been able to isolate or identify the cause, although a certain solvent is the prime suspect. Nor do authorities yet know how the workers were poisoned—whether through ingestion, inhalation, absorption or a combination. Nor is it known whether disabilities may show up in the future among workers who were exposed weeks or even months ago.

### A Growing Problem?

About all that is certain is that industrial workers can be poisoned in a manner that wasn't previously recognized. Dr. John W. Cashman, director of the Ohio Department of Health, which is investigating, says the situation at the Borden plant may be indicative of the type of industrial difficulties that will arise with increasing frequency in the future.

"When you've got American industry using a quarter of a million chemicals in various odd manners and combinations—and when you don't know the effects of those chemicals—sooner or later you're going to find out that you've got a hazard to human health," Dr. Cashman says. Says Dr. Samuel S. Epstein, an environmental-health specialist at Case Western Reserve University and a consultant to the AFL-CIO: "When it comes to the consumer population, we require that food additives, for example, be tested. But when it comes to the worker population, we have a different morality—in that tests aren't required on most products they come in contact with daily."

Until fairly recently, there wasn't any reason for either workers or officials at Columbus Coated Fabrics, the Borden unit involved, even to suspect that they might be dealing with industrial poisoning. In 1961 Borden acquired the company, which dates back to about 1900 and is some three miles northeast of downtown Columbus. Since then, it has become a leading producer of coated wall coverings and other vinyl products.

The first signs of difficulty, which weren't

obvious at the time, came in March and April. At about that time, workers recall, several employees in printing operations, where fabrics are dyed and designs are applied, began to experience strange sensations. Richard D. Staneart, a 27-year-old machine operator, remembers that in March he noticed that his legs seemed weak. "I'd just walk up some steps, and my legs would feel like I'd been through football practice," he says.

At first, Mr. Staneart ignored the weakness. But it grew worse. The first physician he saw found nothing amiss. Thinking that the problem might be flat feet, Mr. Staneart says he bought a new pair of work shoes. In April, he consulted an orthopedic surgeon, who hospitalized him for tests. Both Mr. Staneart and the orthopedic surgeon say the company was told that peripheral neuropathy caused by chemical poisoning was suspected. The tentative diagnosis was confirmed in August by a neurologist.

### Others Notice Symptoms

Soon after Mr. Staneart noticed his first symptoms, other workers in the print department began to experience mystifying problems. James G. Osborne, a 43-year-old service helper, says he was bewildered when in May he first noticed weakness in his arms and legs. He says a physician treated him for arthritis. In June, Mr. Osborne underwent six days of testing by a second doctor, who found nothing wrong. Two months later, a neurologist diagnosed the disease as peripheral neuropathy and informed state health officials that he suspected it was related to Mr. Osborne's work.

Reports conflict about precisely when the company was informed that it was dealing with industrial poisoning. But it is clear that word hit officials at the Borden unit like a thunderclap. "We were upset and distressed," says Joseph S. Recchi, director of employee relations at the plant. "We had never had an inkling of a health problem of this magnitude existing in the plant."

With numerous workers complaining of weakness and other things, investigations were quickly begun by the company, Ohio state health officials and Local 487 of the Textile Workers Union, which represents workers at Columbus Coated Fabrics. So far, the cause of the illness hasn't been determined.

Some of the efforts have concentrated on the hundreds of chemicals and chemical combinations used in the plant. An early suspect as the toxic agent was methyl butyl ketone, or MBK, a solvent used in making printing inks. The chemical's introduction to the plant in August 1972 is considered the only major process change in recent memory. For a time, investigators dropped the chemical as the prime suspect, but they now say it once again tops their list. Meanwhile, the plant has stopped using the chemical.

(Eastman Chemical Products Inc., a subsidiary of Eastman Kodak Co. that markets MBK, says that during the past two years the chemical has become "widely used in the chemical coating industries," largely as a replacement for a potential pollutant. To date, Eastman Chemical says, "nothing in industrial experience" or medical literature suggests a connection between exposure to the chemical and peripheral neuropathy. The company adds, however, that it is giving "serious consideration" to reports involving the Borden plant, and it reiterates previous routine warnings that "contact with the skin and eyes should be avoided.")

### Health Violations

Whatever the poisonous substance, workers contend that the plant has never been known as the cleanest and most comfortable place in town to work. Inspections by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in April and June uncovered 34 health and safety violations, including some involving chemical contaminants in the air. An official of the agency says all the violations were considered "non-serious." But Corwin Smith, president of Local 487, calls health precautions in the plant "terrible—the place is filthy, the ventilation is poor and the sewers stop up."

Since last month, Columbus Coated Fabrics has moved to improve working conditions. The union has discouraged workers from continuing their old practice of eating lunch near the work stations. "Their sandwiches were right out there, absorbing whatever was in the air," says Dr. Cashman, the public-health official. Ventilation in parts of the plant has been improved, and further improvements are promised by November. The company has also begun issuing vapor respirators to all print-department employees.

Meanwhile, the search for the toxic agent goes on, and workers who fear for their health are staying off the job. Mr. Recchi, the company's employee-relations man, says about 200 employees without any sign of the illness have been remaining away from work since early September, along with the 100 or so employees believed to have some degree of nerve damage. With supervisors filling in, the plant is continuing to operate, but the company says it fears "total cessation" if large numbers of workers stay off the job much longer.

Those workers who are still showing up are doing so with misgivings. One reason is that reports from their co-workers who have been stricken are sometimes terrifying. Oakley Dingess, a 39-year-old print operator, who was one of the first to be hit, tells how he "can hardly turn the key to the trunk of my car" and how

action is the absence of any known medical treatment. Physicians tell victims that about all they can do is take it easy and not work too hard. Doctors believe that workers with milder cases will recover within a few months. But for the more seriously impaired, they say complete recovery could take months or even years. Medical men don't rule out the possibility that some workers may be impaired for life, but they consider that prospect doubtful.

Equally troubling for both the company and its workers is that tests at a finished-products warehouse—10 miles away from the Columbus Coated Fabrics plant—have shown that some workers are suffering nerve damage. Employees in a wall-coverings plant in California operated by Borden also tested positive, but some of the equipment used in the tests now is believed to have been faulty. Despite the recent improvement in ventilation and other working conditions at the Columbus plant, it isn't known whether the toxic agent—whatever it is or was—is still present. The company says there now isn't any "undue hazard."

Whatever the extent of the problem, it is clear that all the facts aren't likely to be known for some time. Investigators in Columbus say the search for the toxic agent possibly could take years because they might have to analyze hundreds of chemicals and thousands of ways they can combine and react with one another. Says Dr. Cashman of the Ohio Department of Health: "It's just like you're looking for a murderer, you know. Sometimes it takes a good cop 10 years, but he'll bring in somebody."