

1979
Texas City VCM MCI
Brain Tumor Study PVC

RSV 0020038

SH finds more brain cancers among chemical workers in Texas plants

Concern over brain cancer deaths among chemical workers continued to mount last week with the discovery that the deaths among former employees at Monsanto's Texas City, Tex., chemical intermediates plant were attributable to brain tumors, and that two of the deaths could have been caused by the type of cancer known as glioblastoma multiforme.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health have been investigating brain-cancer deaths since the discovery that nine employees of Union Carbide's Texas City plant died of glioblastoma between 1962 and 1978. One employee with glioblastoma is still living (CW, Feb. 28, p. 22).

OSHA began investigating deaths at the Monsanto plant as the result of a "compliance complaint" received shortly after the discovery of the cancers at Union Carbide. The cases at Monsanto were reviewed after an initial review of 1,200 health records of employees and 100 employees at the plant. Spokesmen for Monsanto say that only two of the deaths could be attributed to glioblastoma, and that there is "no evidence" that the other three were of that rare form of cancer.

Initial indications were that the deaths at both plants could be linked to vinyl chloride monomer but Ben Bare, senior industrial hygienist with OSHA's area office, says several chemicals are now being studied and "the list is growing very day." Included: acrylonitrile, ethylene oxide, polyethylene and their intermediates. Monsanto, which has not made VCM at Texas City since 1968, says it is conducting a study of its employees "stretching back 30 years" and will start another check in phases in cooperation with OSHA and NIOSH.

Vinyl chloride is a suspect as the cause of the cancers because several studies have linked VCM to glioblastoma and other types of brain tumors and because many of the workers with glioblastoma had been exposed to VCM. One study that made a connection between VCM and glioblastoma was sponsored by the Manufacturing Chemists Assn. and published early last year. The study, conducted by Equitable Environmental Health Inc. (Rockville, Md.), examined the death certificates of 9,677 workers exposed to VCM at 34 plants. As well as reporting the incidence of angiosarcoma, the main type of cancer

linked to VCM, the study showed an excess of brain tumor deaths — 12 where statistically there should have been six.

And now there is evidence that the incidence may be even higher than expected. Although 431 death certificates from Union Carbide's Texas City plant were included in the MCA study, none were for victims of glioblastoma. According to Joseph Wagoner, director of OSHA's office of carcinogen identification, "There were no brain cancers among that group of workers" although he points out that the criteria for selecting workers may have inadvertently excluded those with glioblastoma.

Carbide says it submitted data in answer to specific requests by the MCA study group. And the extent of the Carbide workers' exposure to VCM is uncertain. According to Sanford Leffingwell, who heads the NIOSH study team, five workers were clearly exposed, and for two others, evidence is "tenuous." □

Judge lets EPA ban on 2,4,5-T stand

Dow Chemical and 10 co-plaintiffs lost the first round in their attempt to roll back the Environmental Protection Agency's March emergency suspension on use of the herbicides 2,4,5-T (trichlorophenoxyacetic acid) and Silvex.

The 11 companies and trade associations, including users and makers of the herbicides and agricultural and forest-products groups, had sought a temporary injunction against EPA's action in U.S. District Court in Flint, Mich. They asked that the move be found "arbitrary and capricious and done without observance of procedures required by law."

Although U.S. District Court Judge James Harvey declined to rule on the case, he did grant a request for an expedited schedule to review the facts of the ban, which requires EPA officials to appear in Flint in response to EPA's bid for additional time to prepare its case. Judge Harvey

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March 6, 1979

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RSV 0020040

2nd plant reports brain tumor deaths

John Spano

By BILL INMAN
Post Reporter

A federal health investigation into the brain cancer deaths of 10 chemical workers at Union Carbide's Texas City plant has turned up five additional brain cancer deaths at Monsanto's nearby chemical facility.

Both plants once produced the cancer-causing agent vinyl chloride. The substance has been linked by scientists to the brain tumor glioblastoma multiforme.

"We're trying to cooperate and coordinate our efforts fully with the government," said Monsanto spokesman John

Spano from the company's St. Louis headquarters.

"We're concerned, as others are, about the incidence of this form of cancer. We want to stress, however, that the glioblastoma form has not been determined in these last five cases."

The federal investigation stemmed from a Union Carbide worker's complaint received Nov. 31 by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

A scientific team including OSHA and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health specialists soon found at least 10 Union Carbide workers had died of brain cancer between 1962 and 1973.

Six of the 10 victims had glioblastoma

multiforme listed as cause of death on their death certificates. And another two of the group were thought to have that same form of cancer. An 11th Union Carbide worker, still living, also has been diagnosed as having the glioblastoma tumor.

Monsanto began sifting health records and death certificates of some 1,300 workers after it learned of the Union Carbide study, Spano said. OSHA officially approached the plant Feb. 14 and conducted chemical exposure checks.

"It's far too early to make any kind of judgment," said Dr. Joseph Wagner, monitoring the OSHA investigation from Washington.

"At this stage of the game, we're concentrating on Union Carbide, where we feel we have a good sampling."

George Pettigrew, regional NIOSH director, said the records of current and former Union Carbide workers — some 10,000 — are being reconstructed for an epidemiological study.

The time-consuming study will include researching demographic disease patterns and records of plants that produce vinyl chloride. Study results are expected to be months away.

Complicating the record-gathering process, said Pettigrew, is the latency

Please see Another/page 17A

Good morning!

It's Tuesday, March 6, 1979

Another chemical plant finds brain tumor deaths

From page 1

period involved. "It appears that maybe 20 years or so after vinyl chloride exposure, the cancer shows itself. That's something like a time bomb, and it makes our job a lot more difficult."

Two of the five brain cancer deaths at Monsanto have already been earmarked by company researchers for detailed glioblastoma tests, said Spano.

"Nothing has been confirmed thus far," he said.

Monsanto purchased the plant in the mid-40s from the federal government. Vinyl chloride monomers were used in production from 1963 to 1968. Unlike the

Union Carbide plant, Monsanto no longer processes the material.

No Monsanto employee complaints have been filed with federal agencies concerning vinyl chloride, said Joe Clark, head of personnel at the Texas City plant.

He said the company has notified workers through staff meetings of the potential hazard.

Area OSHA director R. David Layton said no citations have been issued against Union Carbide or Monsanto in the past six months for chemical exposure above legal levels.

He said there are "too many complicating factors at this point" to make any definitive connection between the chemical and the Texas City deaths.

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